

This letter was sent to my 5 kids just before Christmas 2000 and reflects my memories of their childhood Christmases.

Dear Larry, Lori, Cindy, Sandi, and Randy,

The tree is a-twinkle and lights glow in the windows of my new Lynchburg home. The scene is set for yet another Christmas. My world is new but holiday memories continue to drift thru my mind. This mom's heart has been "in the season" for a few weeks already as my mind is immersed in visions of you five growing from infants to adulthood with families of your own.



Five rambunctious little blondes in overdrive for Christmas were something quite formidable. It was a case of lots of action and lots of noise. Old Christmas letters spell out a great deal of the story but perhaps I can condense much of it for this memory account.



Grandma Saaijenga kept her sewing machine humming except now she had five times as many garments to prepare for Christmas. One year her creations were constructed with red corduroy and felt horses. Three little red dresses and one red vest were trimmed with white felt horses, complete with colorful yarn manes and tails. (Randy was not yet born that year.)



The smaller of those dresses spent later years adorning one of Grandma's dolls in the antique high chair in her dining room. Another holiday found 3 girls in fluffy sheer bright red dresses trimmed with white lace.



Lots of little kids meant lots of toys. Betty Ader claimed the Faist living room looked like a toy store. You didn't each get many things, but, because you were so close in age, the combined loot looked like a mountain of the same things.



And we jolly-well better not try to pawn off clothes as a Christmas gift for any of you. A sobbing Randy complained bitterly one year at Grandpa Faist's house that all he got that day from relatives were "a bunch of dumb old clothes!" Grandma Faist saved the day with a little green plastic car that she unearthed from a box of old toys in the back of a closet.

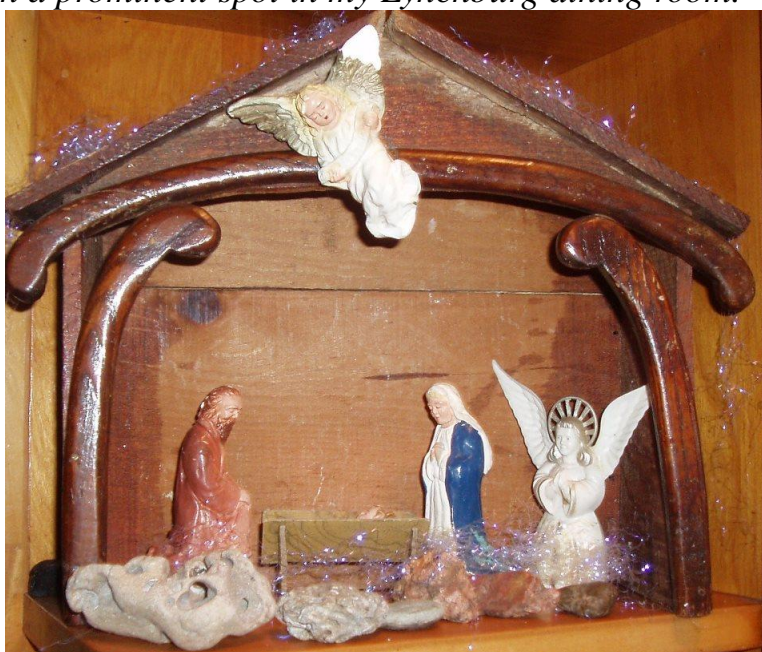


Five little blondes were kept busy memorizing their lines for the Sunday school program at Florence Station Church. Those programs were a big deal with 4 proud grandparents coming to oohh and ahhh over their choice of the five cutest kids there. Happy pictures still flood thru my heart as I remember bundling up five sleepyhead kids and heading for midnight mass at St. Joseph's Church with Grandpa Faist. (Many years later a college age Sandi and I attended St. Thomas's midnight mass to perpetuate Grandpa's memory but it just was not the same as those magical Christmas Eves of your childhood.) You kids used to giggle when people sat behind us and it was obvious that those parishioners had been celebrating the season with wine before mass.

Each evening another decoration was set out and the house was soon ablaze with "blinky lights" as the electric meter whirled and hues of the color wheel danced across the silver tree. *(That's the silver tree below when it was set up in the mobile home in 1962.)*



Most days there was an intense session of identifying the members of the nativity scene (the same one that my aunts sent to me from Nebraska when I was a toddler). Heading up the cast of important characters were Mr. Joseph, the three wise guys (You may recognize them now as the three wise men.), and a bunch of flying guys (better known as angels). *That nativity scene still survives today and is in a prominent spot in my Lynchburg dining room.*



The figurines are chipped, have re-glued heads, and are pretty well worn (One camel bit the dust after it completely fell apart.) from ten little hands examining them with excitement and the awe of children, but I would never dream of repainting or replacing them. They have the patina of love. The tree was a focal point of your attention and you often yanked off the decorations to chew. Randy was especially good at sampling ornaments

By 1969, the silver tree had been permanently boxed for storage (It and the infamous color wheel were sold this past January and brought a good price as a nostalgic collectable.) and a large green one took its place. Ten tiny hands helped adorn it so the plastic bells and shiny balls weren't always spaced properly and the tinsel sometimes drooped where it should loop but the love invested far outweighed the lack of Madison Avenue perfection.

It was a big mystery why that tree often fell over so we had to tie it to a screw in the wall. *In the 1969 picture below you can see the tree anchored to the wall. We tried to disguise the string with a fancy decoration (made of loops of construction paper and tinsel) but it drooped too.*



Years later you five "fessed up" that you were pulling the tree over to see how far the balls rolled. There will be justice when your kids pull the same stunts on you.



By the mid 70's the Sunday school program pieces were getting longer and the "wish lists" were getting more expensive. Randy cleared off his section of the toy shelf in anticipation of "lots 'n lots of toys."



Larry's classmates in Baileyville School were making Christmas gifts for their parents. The teacher told each student that they could not ask their parents for money to cover the cost of materials. Instead they must earn the money. Larry asked me how he could earn that cash. I told him that I would give him the money if he could go one whole afternoon without fighting with his sisters. After an immediate, "But Mom, isn't there ANY other way?", Larry proceeded to his room, locked the door for the rest of the afternoon, and success was his. That year the 6' lighted star and the 7' cross were in their places of honor high atop the grain bins, conveying the Faist family's greetings to neighbors. The windows were still glowing with blinking lights and a lighted village was showcased on the mantle of the big white artificial fireplace (another of Geekee Gramma's creations). Hanging from the mantle were five colorful hand crocheted stockings.



Chiming churches and glow-in-the-dark angels were part of the happy chaos.

About the first week in October I used to mix up numerous batches of sugar cookie dough, cut out the cookies, and freeze the unbaked shapes in big square Tupperware containers. In mid December we had a cookie baking day and you five created fun with frosting and colored sugar all over the house. By Christmas those cookies were long gone, but that was OK with you. You were ready to move on to candy and other goodies by then.

In the hallway of my home hangs a small plaster Raggedy Anne plaque that was Lori's gift from her 4th grade teacher, Mrs. Hoffman. It surfaced in a box of miscellaneous whatever when I was sorting "stuff" for my Freeport exodus. I kept it because it is a link to my little girl and reminds me of the excitement in her eyes when she was Mom's helper.

One Christmas Aunt Marion and Uncle Merlyn Greenfield arrived with 5 large black bulging garbage bags. Oh, Joy! They contained your very own huge pillows for watching TV from the floor and you were so happy. During those years you each wanted many gifts under the tree. Once I made the tactical error of placing all of your gifts in five large boxes and you each received one huge wrapped gift. I learned not to do that again. It was fine to supply each of you with a huge box to stash your opened gifts, but there better be lots of packages under that tree for each of you.





Can you ever forget those Freeport Radio Police Auxiliary Christmas parties? The adults had a pleasant time but you kids were bored to tears.

Some years Christmas was tinged with sadness too. Uncle Merlyn's dad died one Christmas morning and a few years later your Great Grandma Pieper passed away on Christmas afternoon. *That's you kids below with your Great Gramma Pieper in 1968.*



In the blink of an eye my five toddlers were in high school and college and Santa had ridden off into the sunset, chasing the Tooth Fairy and the Easter Bunny. Santa had always brought a big tub of candy and nuts, but now you helped me fill the stash of treats on Christmas Eve. One year Cindy's high school class decided to forgo the traditional gift exchange and, instead, used the money to purchase tooth brushes, shampoo, and play dough for the residents of St. Francis School. That same year Lori was a part-time cashier at Garrity Gifts and the mall Santa came into the store in full costume - beard and all - and bawled her out royally because the store had just raised the price of his favorite chewing tobacco. It was a shattering experience. Yes, Santa had indeed "blown his cover."

The tree was usually put up on Thanksgiving night and one year Tim Stearns was a part of the action. That was the same year that Sandi climbed the 100' tower and strung lights from top to bottom.

As young adults, you rarely missed a Christmas on Florence Road, traveling from Texas, Missouri, Georgia, Southern Illinois, or wherever your busy lives took you. Late December in the Midwest can sometimes generate impressively low temperatures. One such year Lori arrived home to record-breaking lows and decided she would always live in the South. A few days after Christmas that year Sandi and I took Lori to O'Hare for a late evening flight to Georgia. Instead of going back to Freeport, we headed for downtown Chicago to view the holiday decorations and, OH!, what a beautiful sight we found. We tromped along Michigan Avenue among throngs of happy people at midnight. Even the horse-drawn carriages were still jingling along the streets and the decorated store windows were spectacular, well worth any loss of sleep we incurred for our impulsive decision.

Forever holding a place of honor in my memory bank is the Christmas Eve you stood beside me in the balcony of Faith Church and watched the congregation silently walking down the main aisle, each carrying a lighted candle in the darkened sanctuary. The look of joy on those people's faces is what Christmas is all about.

Later years found some of you bringing your special loved ones home for Christmas. Lori brought her Jeff from New Jersey one year. Cindy brought her Freddie another time. That was the year I just knew Freddie was a special fellow. The plan was for Cindy, Freddie, your dad, and me to go to late evening church services at New Covenant. When it was time to head out for church, both your dad and Cindy were deeply asleep so Freddie went with me. We drove Westward through downtown Freeport on a nearly deserted Stephenson Street and admired the warm glow of pinkish streetlights on the newly fallen untracked snow, then drove through the alley past the beautiful big red apple.



At church, this young man from Virginia grabbed my hand and we joined in the circle of the lighted candle celebration. He had my immediate whole-hearted vote for future son-in-law from then on!

Another Christmas Eve day Cindy helped me move Grandpa Faist to Stephenson Nursing Center. She spent the afternoon taping Grandpa's many Christmas cards to the wall, even though he no longer had the sight to see them.

For many years, very late on Christmas Eve, I used to take a walk out to the farrowing house and stand in silence in the warm, quiet, dimly lit building full of newborn pigs.



Mentally I was transported to a stable in Bethlehem for a little while and my world was at peace. That building no longer houses animals and I live nearly a thousand miles away but the memories of those nights and my little kids will forever fill my heart.

This is the first Christmas of the new century and my five little blondes are all grown with children of their own. It is time for this mom to hand over the memory saga duties to a new generation. Major family changes have ensured that life will never be the same and you will no longer celebrate Christmas with your dad and me on Florence Road, but that is OK too. You have your own traditions to form and I will be proudly watching.

I love you so much!