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"CHRISTMAS IN DIXIE" A Story Rekindled

by: RJ Rhodes



"Christmas in Dixie" - The Lamplighter and townfolk

Matthew : Chapter 1:18,19,20,21,24,25 of The New Testament,King James Version

18.This is how the birth of Jesus Christ came about. His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be with child through the Holy Spirit. (19.) Because Joseph, her husband was a righteous man and did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quickly. (20.) But after he had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said "Joseph, Son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived of her is from the Holy Spirit. (21.) She will give birth to a son and you are to give Him the name Jesus, because He will save His people from their sins. (24.) When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife. (25.) But he had no union with her until she gave birth to a son. And he gave him the name Jesus.

So....the story of "Christmas in Dixie " began from a Nativity depicting the birth of Jesus Christ in a manger, a gift given to the late Mrs. Lyda Jean Bennett and her husband Mr. Earl Bennett from her mother.

Mrs. Bennett was the founder of Christmas in Dixie that once existed on eight acres on a hilltop right along highway 22 going east of Taliaferro County. With the help of her husband, six children and sixteen grandchildren at the time who were living in the country farmhouse or in trailers scattered throughout the acreage, a great event was born that lingers in memories of thousands of people who visited and came back again and again beginning the eve of Thanksgiving when the lights were turned on and the sweet aroma of hot chocolate and hot dogs on the grill began to fill the air. In the minds of many, Crawfordville is remembered as "Christmas in Dixie".

Its first year was just family around a big bonfire with Mr. Bennett playing the banjo as the family made joyful noises. The next year was more lights attracting people to stop, rolling their windows down to look and listen to the inviting music. The family soon invited people to join and with their giving spirit, they decided to do it right. Everyone in the family with a paycheck started laying aside \$25.00 a week. The rest made things up.. handmade homemade folk-sy *art* Christmas stuff that people seemed to enjoy. The hilltop property soon became a little quaint Christmas village by Thanksgiving eve. Hundreds were coming from all over the South, so they built a barn-like structure to accommodate the visitors and by the time they got finished, the barn was bigger than the house with public restrooms and chairs for the elderly.

The story of a seventeen year old who had no idea of the significance of the Nativity asked Mrs. Bennett "Lady do you mind telling me what this is all about?"

"Do you mean to tell me that you don't know the story of Christmas?"

"No ma'am, I reckon, I don't."

And so she told the story the best she could. This opened an idea for the family to create life-like sculptures and scenes that told a story. The Lamplighter in an old hay wagon full of folks going home for Christmas, a military camp scene honoring troops overseas in Desert Storm, life-like form of Mary on an oak log and baby Jesus doll and many more as an example of the family's handmade creations.

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By the 10th year 1993, the family had estimated 50,000 visitors, roasted 19,000 hot dogs, 2718 gallons of hot chocolate and 75,000 lights. This was also the year spooky things began to happen. Lights began to go out prompting them to put out 100 more lights. 1994, the family were expecting their biggest year ever; it was also the year Christmas in Dixie was listed on the travel book. From August to September ,they worked tirelessly eight hours a day unrolling and checking strings of lights and adding 50,000 more and opened to the public by Thanksgiving eve. That very night ,somebody came through and pulled lights off 50 trees, stole Scrooge ,opened the Gingerbread House and stole things but the couple kept things quiet.

Big trouble started on Wednesday December 7th when they caught seven teenage boys trying to knock over one scene until Mr. Bennett finally got the boys off the property with some help from visitors. Sunday, December 11th , three hours past midnight , Mr. and Mrs. Bennett were awakened to the thumps of vandals. Mrs. Bennett told her husband "they're tearing up the wagon!" He jumped out of bed and crashed out the back door with his wife behind as the vandals dashed and took off to their cars. Mrs. Bennett in her own words 'I saw Frosty The Snowman all beat up and if a tornado had come through I don't think it could have been any worse. My sculptured dolls were hanging up in trees and decorations have been thrown into mudholes along the side of the road. Judy told me , "Mama you don't want to go any further .they've torn up the Nativity scene". Every figure had its head cut off including baby Jesus doll and threw him in the mudhole. When I looked down that hill, seeing nothing but destruction after we had worked so hard, it was as if a family member had died. My insides collapsed and my heart could hardly beat. We had spent all our time and money and we never asked for anything in return except for people to enjoy themselves. The blood was pulsating in my head. I was still dizzy when a woman who said she was from Alabama tried to console me between her sobs. "Then came a woman behind who had driven from Augusta with her granddaughter who asked a hardnosed bachelor we knew from town and the girl asked him "Mister why did they do this?".

"I just stood there numb, I needed to know what right anybody had to hurt a little girl who just wanted to see Rudolph. Next thing I knew that hardnosed bachelor pulled out a hundred dollar bill ,which he handed to me ."Here's your first donation to repair it," Then a neighbor drove up with his pickup loaded with decorations he had gathered from the roadside, a lawyer friend came by and started a repair fund. But soon the day was gone and we had hardly begun to fix anything. we were all feeling mighty awful, but I said, Well the lights are still pretty, we've got the building, hot dogs and the people. we worked inside keeping the hot chocolates flowing and around closing time Bill came in and said "you won't believe this ,but somebody set up the displays down the hill."

"Who?" I asked. "The people" they went in the mudholes and ditches and brought things up. They set the wagon up with the figures sitting on it. Anything that was out of it display they've put it back the best they could. An hour before the stroke of midnight Judy called her mother after she walked back to her trailer and said "Mama, your Nativity scene's back up. You won't believe what the people have done."

By Monday morning, a radio station started collecting donations, firefighters from near Richmond County organized volunteers and donations for decorations. Other great stories emerged from this event such as a lady from South Carolina called Mrs. Bennett to tell her story

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"My husband and I had been coming every year. Last year we were going to get divorced but I decided to take my little girl to you anyway .When we arrived , lo and behold, there was my husband .We decided to make another go of it and now ,we're happier than ever."

"I must have had a hundred callers that Monday, each one had a tale to tell how much Christmas in Dixie had meant to them. That night I thought, Well, Sunday was the worst day of my life and now today has been the best. On Tuesday, with the help of the firefighters and all volunteers, we glued, patched, wired and sewed everything back together. It wasn't one hundred percent but it was good enough."

"The vandals thought what we had was just boards, lights and materials, but I learned it was more.It was a place where families came back together, where the lonely found a spot by the fire, where people from institutions felt normal, where a rich lady in a fur coat can stand next to a dirty, runny nosed little boy roasting a hot dog."

"This was where the story of baby Jesus could make Christmas real again, where spiritual awakening could take place. I've got to tell you, I know, because my own tired and torn up spirits had been warmed up pretty good. And it was Christmas in Dixie again."

Mrs. Bennett passed away July 19, 2006, is survived by her husband Mr. Earl Bennett who still resides on the hill. The old farmhouse was torn down and replaced by a modest modern country farmhouse with a wraparound porch but that did not take the place of the good memories that still lingers around the property on the hillside.

Christmas in Dixie was held each season from 1982 til 1997.

(I would like to thank Judy and Kelly for furnishing my reference to this story and for allowing me to rekindle such a great story one might not have ever known until they read the real story The book was titled Christmas Nativities and Stories by Elisabeth Van Mullekon-Cserep, pgs.36,37,38,39.

Part of this story was also obtained from the Augusta Chronicle 7/ 20/06).