

Fruit and fireworks filled Old Hoke County Christmases

by Sonya Falls

December 18, 1984, Raeford, NC - Parents continue their frantic two month search for Cabbage Patch dolls and Transformers. These elusive items, they are certain, will mean the difference between a perfect Christmas or a disastrous one. Assuredly, the Christmas tree will be surrounded by gifts for their children, but without these special items...well, come on, let's just try one more store.

December 18, 1934, Raeford, NC - The young boy counted his money carefully. He had been saving a long time for this. He had just enough for all the firecrackers he would need for Christmas Eve on Main Street. The sound would be awesome.

Christmas traditions, gifts, and trappings, like everything else, change with the times. Just as Hoke County and Raeford have grown from a small isolated farming town to a larger, busier civic region, values, lifestyles and how people celebrate the upcoming holiday have all changed.

Christmas in Raeford in the '20's and '30's may have lacked the commercial glitter it possesses today, but according to many Hoke Countians, it certainly was an exciting, special time of year. Families were larger and celebrated together.

Churches and schools provided most of the entertainment for the holiday season and any extraordinary event, such as a Christmas tree strung with electrical lights, had special meaning.

Robert Gatlin, a longtime resident of Raeford recently told of Christmases past and of traditional activities.

It was a longstanding tradition, he said, for citizens to line both sides of Main Street on Christmas Eve, for a huge firecracker display. A challenge would be made for the loudest, most impressive explosives.

"We saved everything we could to buy fireworks," Gatlin said.

"I would save the hog bladder from Thanksgiving hog killing, dry it out, blew it up and tie it off." When stuck with a pin on Christmas Eve, it produced a noise as loud as any firecracker.

Gatlin remembers one Christmas when, due to street paving, Main Street was blocked to pedestrians and traffic. Fireworks were heavy that night he said. And clean up, the next morning was a major undertaking.

According to Gatlin, Christmas gifts were fewer in those days. County residents had less to buy with, but also a lack of advertising, communication and travel influenced Christmas purchases.

"Fruits, such as oranges and

raisins, and nuts were seen only at Christmas. My grandfather had a crate full of oranges and apples in a closet. They had been shipped by rail for Christmas."

These special foods many times were the only expected Christmas treat. "I don't smell an orange to this day that it doesn't remind me of Christmas."

Decorations within the home were scant, unless homemade. Often a holly tree would be brought in as the Christmas tree. With its glossy leaves and bright red berries, Gatlin insisted that no more decorations were needed. Door wreaths were not in fashion but real candles were often set in windows.

Christmas socializing occurred primarily in the area school and churches.

Sam Morris remembers school programs as being religious in nature and traditionally given each year.

"There was more of an emphasis on the true meaning of Christmas," he recalled.

Christmas parties were held at churches and schools with grade moms and Santa distributing mothers' homemade candy.

Carolers, usually the young people's groups of the Methodist, Baptist and Presbyterian churches, were a familiar sight around Raeford, and Christmas morning services were held frequently at local churches.

Christmas, traditionally, is a time to share with the less fortunate.

Looking back, Gatlin and Morris agree that Raeford, before "Share Your Christmas" and the Department of Social Services, was still a giving, caring community. They point out, however, that philanthropic efforts were more of a personal endeavor. Churches looked after their own needy, farm owners provided special boxes for their sharecropping families and for many years, the fire department repaired toys for poorer children.

During the second World War, Christmas could have been a lonelier affair for glider trainees at Camp Mackall, had it not been for county extension clubs who provided Christmas "ditty bags" and cards for them.

Josephine Hall, longtime extension agent in the county, recalled other extension projects around Christmas.

Slippers were made one year for residents of McCain, and Christmas programs were given each year at the Pine Forest Community Building under the auspices of extension service. Many local children participated in these programs.

Through extension efforts, county residents learned, socializ-

ed and in 1939, gained electricity. Hall cites that year as the first one that county residents could have lights on their Christmas trees as the REA moved to electrify Hoke County.

Christmas lights in Raeford have been a part of the city's decor for a long time.

Marie Warner remembers coming to Raeford for the first time in 1935 and being thrilled by the sight of W.T. Covington's reindeer on top of the Old Elk Restaurant all dressed up, complete with lights, a sleigh and a Santa. She and Gatlin both described colored lights being strung completely across Main Street in the mid-thirties.

A special project of the Woman's Club during this time period involved decorations of cedar trees on Main Street.

Spearheaded by Mrs. Florrie Cameron, donations from downtown merchants were collected to plant and decorate three cedar trees on each median strip on Main Street.

Luke McNeill remembers the lights being so bright that touch football was possible under the trees.

For about 10 years, residents of Raeford enjoyed these decorations and many outsiders drove to see these trees.

Mrs. Warner remembers magazine coverage of them in *State* magazine around 1937-38. During the mid-forties, the trees grew so large that the highway department removed them, thus ending another home grown Christmas tradition.

Traditions are created and kept because they are meaningful to people.

Although most people don't value a gift of oranges and nuts as our grandparents might have, new traditions and values are created in everyone's family at this time of year.

The materialism and commercialism which is such a part of our life today grew out of those desperately poor depression and pre-war years.

Those who treasured their small gifts at Christmas are the very ones who helped make this county one of the most affluent in the world thus enabling their children to have more than oranges and nuts; in other words, Cabbage Patch dolls and Transformers.

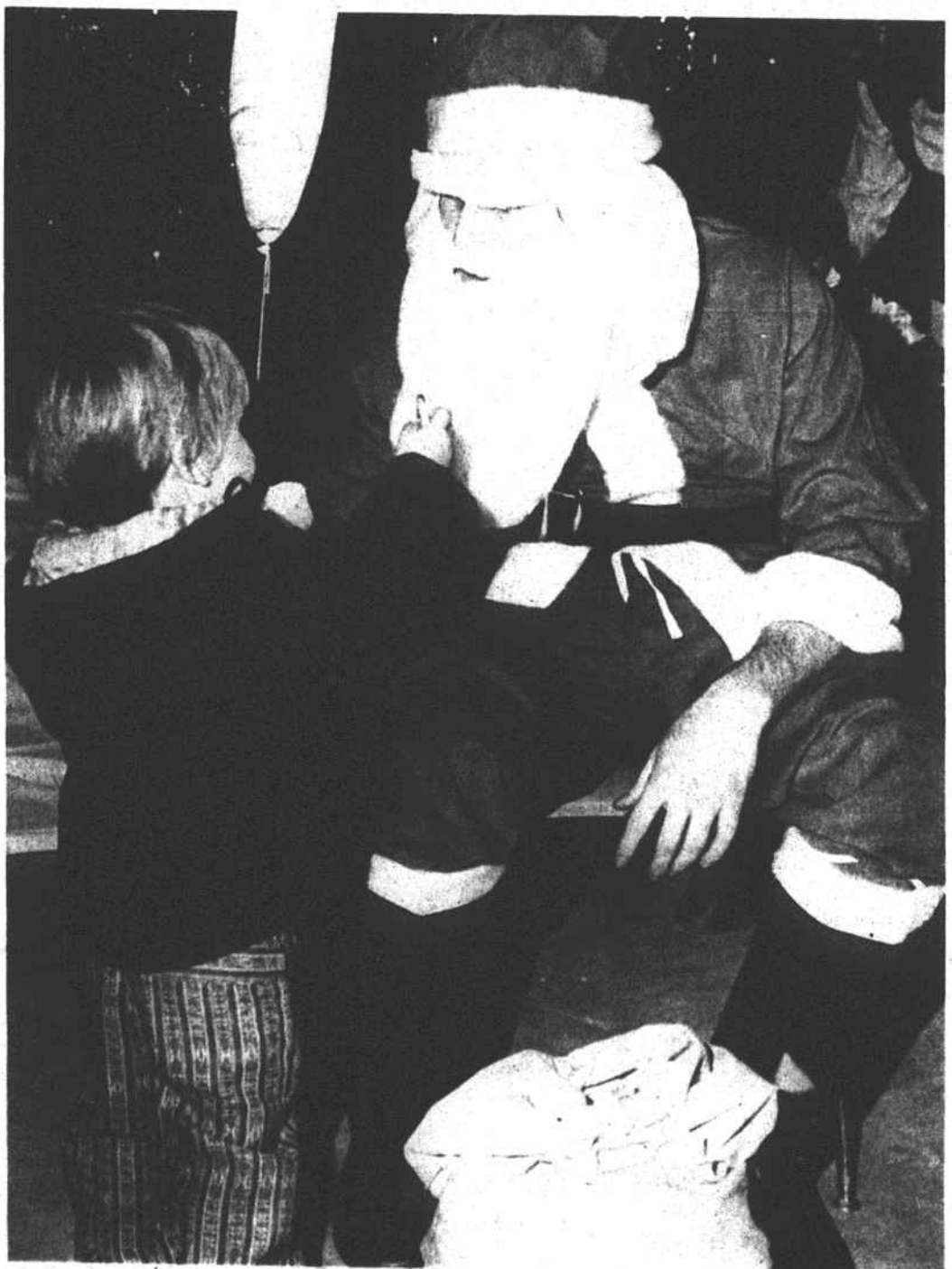
A materialistic picture, yes, but part of tomorrow's Christmas memories.

December 18, 2044, Raeford, NC - The little old lady, grayhaired and frail, cuddles her great-granddaughter closely. "Oh, my dear. I wish you could have seen my Cabbage Patch doll. Her name was Lisa Trixie and she was beautiful."



Anticipation
Young Elgin Blue, who was recently selected as Honorable Mention All-East by the Raleigh News and Observer for his defensive play with the Hoke

High Bucks this year, is eagerly awaiting Christmas in this 1970 photograph. Blue has gained some weight, age and brawn since the photo was taken.



Are you kidding me?
This youngster at the first annual Knit-Away Inc. Children's Christmas party in 1972 appears to have

had some doubts about the authenticity of Santa's beard.



Earning Christmas money
Bob Townsend (right) makes a big sale of mistletoe during the 1972 Christmas season.