

Tom Marshall's Weekly News, December 25, 2017

Christmas Day, 1933 (*Repeat of December 26, 2006*): As was the custom when I was growing up, Christmas was always spent with my mother's family, the Shallcrosses. Sometimes the gathering was at Auburn Heights, sometimes it was at the Fergusons' in Ridley Park (my mother's eldest sister was married to Bassett Ferguson), and sometimes it was at "Flowerdale," my grandmother Shallcross's home in Middletown, Delaware. That is where we were on Christmas Day, 1933.

December 25 that year was warm and sunny in Delaware. When we arrived at grandmother's home about mid-day, her greater family was gathering in her sun porch. The sun was streaming in from this southern exposure, and it was very pleasant while awaiting the call to dinner. Aunt Helen and Uncle Gene Shallcross, both single and living with their mother, always had a toy or a short game to entertain this 9-year-old. I enjoyed my first cousins, the Ferguson boys, as Bassett, Jr. called "Jimty" was 22, and Gene was 17. Associating with them made me feel grown up. My dad always enjoyed conversation with their father, Uncle Bassett. The women, including my mother and Aunt Mary Ferguson, were busy in the kitchen, and grandmother, 81 years old at the time, was supervising the overall operation.

We were called to dinner at the elongated table set up in the dining room. Grandmother was at one end in a bay window of the room, and Uncle Ned, also unmarried and living at home, was to carve the turkey at the other end with his back against the outside door. In between were the Fergusons, the Marshalls, Gertrude Whittock (a favorite cousin of grandmother's whom we called "Cousin Gertie"), Aunt Helen, Uncle Gene with his special friends Mabel Allen and her daughter, and possibly one or two more guests. I never saw such a variety of food, some of it seemingly for the first time, and I enjoyed sampling all of it. Finally, two or three kinds of pie were offered for dessert, and probably mints, nuts, "ginger," and other candies. Not long after leaving the table, I had a terrible stomach ache, but fortunately it was short-lived and everything was fine again.

Grandmother's three daughters insisted she should rest for an hour or so, and she obliged. Uncle Gene took his namesake, Gene Ferguson, on a short tour of some of the farms. My father, Uncle Bassett, and "Jimty" were engaged in a conversation about the future, and the latter commented that when we assembled for Christmas, 1938, we would probably know the answers. When darkness came, Aunt Mary and my mother thought their mother and Cousin Gertie would enjoy seeing some of the lighted trees in Middletown, and since both my father and Uncle Bassett had 7-passenger Packard sedans with early heaters, there would be plenty of room for all who wanted to go. Several but certainly not all homes had outdoor trees in their front yards with never more than 3 dozen incandescent lights, all multi-colored. Today these decorations would seem crude and distasteful, but for someone born in 1852 as was my grandmother, they were spectacular.

About 7:30, it was time to eat again. "Left-overs" were brought back to the dining room table and those who were still around sat down to enjoy them. I have always liked left-overs. Middletown, like many small communities, had a dance on Christmas night. Uncle Bassett joked that he was going to the dance if he could find a date. His sons did not seem to have an interest in it. When we left about 9:30 for the drive home, he was still talking about going to the dance, but I'm quite sure he did not. When starting out on a winter evening, lap robes were used until the early Tropic Aire heater eventually warmed the car to a comfortable level. It took 45 minutes from Middletown to Yorklyn (with no traffic). Sometimes we went through Cooch's Bridge and Newark, and sometimes through Kirkwood, Bear Station, "Christine," and Stanton.