EDITOR'S NOTE: This story was written by Gladys Calhoun Case, president of the New Orleans branch of the National League of American Pen Women, and author of "The Story of Sugar," published in 1970 and "The Bayou Chene Story," an historical account of the people of the Atchafalaya Basin, published in 1973. This is a delightful childhood reminiscence about Christmas Eve on an Acadian plantation.

Excitement ran high in our household. My sister Ethie and I had been invited to spend the Christmas holidays on the plantation with Aunt Bee, Uncle Steve and their children, Stephen Jr. and Katherine. The plantation was Duchamp, a three-story house that stood on a hill with small, winding roads on three sides. The fourth side, the front, faced the road that led to the small towns of Broussard and St. Martinville. A swamp surrounded the hill and there were little plank bridges for crossing to the distant sugar cane fields. The machinery for the fields and the sheds for the animals stood beyond the swamp, which for us held fascination only in summer.

We were enchanted with the idea of Christmas on the plantation, but Mama, with her usual common sense, would not give her consent at first. I was 9 and my sister 11, and there were the problems of transportation and a suitable chaperon for us. But then one day we were told we could go - on the train as far as Broussard, then a horse and buggy to meet us with the surgery. Our chaperon was to be our debonair young uncle, just 18, whom we all loved. His name was Laurie.

At last came the day of departure. We pinched ourselves and each other, scarcely believing our good luck. On the train, Laurie kept us amused and scared, in turn, with wild tales that were made all the more believable by the rain pelting down against the windowpanes of the coach. And dusk was falling. It would be full dark by the time we arrived.

When we finally reached Broussard, we saw Numa immediately, though only his broad smile was visible, he was so bundled up against the damp coldness. But what was this? Mules, instead of the magnificent pair of golden horses, Sunset and Goldie, that usually pulled the surrey. Numa apologized to our uncle. You know, Mr. Laurie, horses could not have pulled us up and down these hills. De mules can hardly make it in dis mud. Efficiently he tucked us in the back seat and almost smothered us with lap robes. We could feel the warmth of the hot bricks wrapped in newspaper under our feet. We could have gone to deep easily except for the running conversation between Numa and Laurie on the front seat. We were curious about the happenings on the plantation since our summer visit, and we didn't want to miss a word.

Numa was right. Even the mules had a hard time against the rain that still fell, and Numa had to drag them around the street. But at last we reached Duchamp. The yapping of the dogs had announced our coming. Uncle Steve and Aunt Bee were at the door, and with many hugs and kisses they made us feel welcome. They led us into the great hall with the blazing log fire in the huge fireplace and they helped us off with our wet clothing. There was the sound of grown-up talk and the warmth of the fire so we could sleep. The maid brought us great mugs of milk and yummy bread. As soon as we were finished, she took us up to our bedroom. Shook up the fire in the small grate and helped us into the high feather bed. We were asleep instantly.

Before we knew it, the bright sunshine was shining through the window. But it was over but we knew the cold remained. Lillie arrived with small cups of steaming coffee, called eye-openers. She beamed when she said, "Fairly good, I'll have to move the furnaces a little." That was Christmas Eve, and we have so much work in the kitchens we ain't got no time to waste on you children. She did not mean a word of it. She and the other house servants just loved company, and we were Lillie's favorites.

Quickly we washed and dressed and ran downstairs, anxious to see the children who had been asleep when we arrived the night before. The call to breakfast was a welcome one, and the table groaned under a true plantation breakfast, fresh pork sausage with gravy to pour over the grits, meat-in-your-mouth biscuits with homemade country butter and fig preserves. There was cafe au lait for the adults and all the well to seat up get some meat on your bones.

After breakfast, we put on our coats and got permission to visit The Quarter where the plantation servants lived. We knew everyone by name and asked about the ones who were still in the fields trying to get the sugar cane crop into the mill before Christmas. We saw the new additions to the families, asked their names and were allowed to rock the more dour ones.

Then to the bayou, where we would slide down the ladder into the pile of hay at the bottom. The servant's children who were too young to work or go to school were allowed to play with us, and we all hoped to get through the long day with a minimum of bruised shins. Ghost stories were told and, whether we believed or not, the stories somehow always returned at night to fill our heads with doubts.

Finally the day ended. It was Christmas Eve and almost time for the preliminaries to begin. After supper we children settled ourselves by the big fire in the hall to await developments. There were mysterious sounds from the closed parlor door, through which Uncle Steve and Laurie had disappeared.

At last the parlor door swung open. There before our eyes was a never-to-be-forgotten sight. A tall Christmas tree cut on the plantation reached almost to the great room's high ceiling. It was all festooned with popcorn, red and white paper chains and red cranberries. A few bouquets ornaments were scattered here and there. But there were a hundred tiny 6-inch colored candles, each in a little tin holder with a clip that was fastened to the tree branches. Every candle was 3 inches tall, and the fireful, glittering spectacle of the whole. A spicy aroma came out from the freshly cut pine tree. After a final inspection, we children settled down to enjoy the show. It was a long, long time for this not our night. Tonight was reserved for the plantation workers, both field and house servants.

After dinner the back porch, took a huge cowboy from a hook on the wall and gave it a few lusty twangs. No other signal was needed. Every cabin door swung open. The fires were crackling. There was no need for this was not our night. Tonight was reserved for the plantation workers, both field and house servants.

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From behind another door sprang a fat, overprovided Santa Claus. Laurie, of course.

The smaller children were at first apprehensive, but the sight of Santa's elfine propriety and the speed with which the several families were asked to identify their brothers and sisters, overcame their timidity, and they joined in the fun and laughter. Soon began to give out the presents from the laden sacks. This was the time for the material for Sally's, new shoes for some of the children and a new pair of yellow shoes for Numa (because he always dressed up when he drove this folks to town in the summer). A much needed household gadget for some, new overalls for the field hands. Each child received a toy - a top, a ball or a sack of marbles for the boys, and the girls got small dolls. Each was given a bag of candy that hung from the branches in tiny, gaily striped paper bags. During the last of the distribution of candy, the, box nimbly slipped to the kitchen and returned with trays of tiny glasses and decanters of wine.

The Christmas tree festivities were over, but not the activity in the quarter. As the servants filed out and down the path, they broke into a Christmas hymn, "Oh, Come All Ye Faithful.

Not to be outdone, knowing the spectacle of the lighted tree would take place all over again on Christmas Day. And there would be the great dinner that would take much of the day with the preparation of good food, talk and wine. Relatives and friends would come to partake of the hospitality of Duchamp. Looking back, I see that Christmases of yesteryear were filled with life. I see the huge Christmas tree, with its hundred candles as a symbol of brotherhood as we practiced it in 1909.

Gladys Calhoun Case

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