

The babe in the manger of our vintage Nativity set is missing his right hand and the camel keeper has been glued together more than once. Even with these flaws, I treasure this cast of Christmas characters that have been handed down through three generations of my husband's family. The ritual of placing the nativity in our daily midst for the holiday season is my favorite part of celebrating Advent.

As I contemplate the miniature diorama, I am reminded of a live nativity I was part of many years ago. Our little Methodist church in rural Calloway County was one of the center points of our family. In those days, entertainment outside of three channels on TV was generally found at school or church throughout the year unless the college was offering something special.

Our Sunday school teachers were usually the parents or grandparents of we kiddos. These faithful servants were creative and inspirational. Most every year's Christmas celebration included the children, teens, and, more often than not, the adults, acting out the drama of that special night long ago. For those Christmas "pageants" as they were called, the pulpit and choir would be moved to the side so the altar area could be made into a stage. White sheets were strung up with safety pins, serving as curtains to be closed after each act. This formality was intended to add to the dramatic effect but likely became part of the show at times.

We'd work for weeks before the event to create our costumes. Mothers would make white angel frocks with tinsel-edged wings while boys and dads would search for the perfect substance to create big, bushy beards. If memory serves, there were some incredibly audacious fabrics back in the 1960s which led to some colorful bathrobes. Those fabulous finds were used for the royalty making their way from the east. All three were appointed with paper mâché

crowns of gold, studded with plastic rubies and emeralds.

Shepherds were outfitted with a rope tied at the waist of their modest brown clothing. Mary always wore some kind of blue wrap, perhaps from a curtain or a well-worn tablecloth. Joseph and the shepherds wore towels tied around their heads. Sometimes baby Jesus was a real baby if there was a newborn in the congregation that year. We did our very best to honor the pictures of the memorable scene found in our Bibles.

I don't know whose idea it was, but there were a few years that the congregation decided it would be fun to produce a live nativity for others who did not attend our church. It was to be held outside, in front of the church. Parents were just as enthusiastic as we youngsters and the entire church got behind the idea.

For the stable, the men came together and used various size boards for a frame, which was overlaid with hickory slabs left over from firing tobacco. Those slabs were flat from the saw cut on one side with bark on the other. The bark provided the perfect rustic look we imagined might be found in Bethlehem.

In deciding who would play which characters, I guess we took time about, probably swapping so everyone got a chance to stand inside the stable for a little while. There might be a female king one year and, occasionally one of the fellows would be an angel. I don't recall any live animals, but we had life-size wooden cutouts of sheep and a donkey placed in our midst. Someone even had the presence of mind to illuminate the scene with spotlights.

Typically, these live events were held on the Friday and Saturday evenings the weekend before the big day. There were shifts for each night so Sunday School classes would sign up for a set time. As teenagers would do, we didn't stand perfectly still and quiet, but when someone saw car lights they

## Hometown Ramblings

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### The live Nativity



Photo provided

Nativity scenes, whether live or miniature, bring with them a lot of cherished Christmas memories for many people.

would say, "car from afar" so we could straighten up and get back in character. Many cars would speed right on by, but some would slow down and a few would even park and walk out to us.

It was a fun time to be with our friends, except for one thing. Apparently, no one had thought about how cold it might be in the weeks leading up to Christmas. When the weekend arrived, the temperature always took a decided dip into teeth-chattering territory.

Fortunately, the parents who had to drive their children, along with several of the elders of the church, provided a warming station in the fellowship hall. The laughter and discussion during those breaks indicated they had as much fun as those who were manning the manger scene out front. There were warm cups of hot chocolate for what felt like frostbit hands, along with snacks and a few baked goodies

for special treats.

I'm grateful for the lessons those dear ones taught us and how they encouraged us to share the love of Jesus with others. Not only were they teaching us, but they were showing us, too.

As the big day draws closer and schedules become more frantic, let's take a moment to remember the Nativity scene from 2,000 years ago. Happy birthday, Jesus, you are the reason for this most wonderful time of year.

Author's note: A special thanks to my classmates, Margaret McCallon and Randy McCallon, for reminiscing with me to recall the details of our live Nativity, those many years ago.

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