ESSAYS

A Very Merry Southern Christmas

Memory, family, and tradition brighten the season of light.

Allen Mendenhall · December 18, 2025

> *"The people that walked in darkness have seen a great light: they that dwell in the land of the shadow of death, upon them hath the light shined."*
> *—Isaiah 9:2*

My mother didn't speak of the luminaries until recently, some fifty years after she first saw them lining Collinwood Street in Opelika, Alabama. The paper bags, soft and glowing, like tiny miracles set against the December dark, left an impression she carried for the rest of her life.

She was just a girl then, riding the Christmas parade float two years in a row: first as a third grader, when every child had a seat, and again in the fourth grade, plucked by luck or favor when a few

extra spots opened. That second ride was a benediction, a quiet blessing, and I like to imagine her, perched on the float, feeling the thrill of being chosen.

But it was the luminaries that captured her imagination, the way they turned streets into a sort of dreamscape. She saw them only once before her family moved to Atlanta, yet she never forgot. Years later, in our house on Rushmore Drive in Marietta, Georgia, she took charge of creating the luminaries as if the season itself depended on them. She and I can't agree now whether it was in that house or later, at Baldwin Farms, a different neighborhood, but I remember her: measuring sand, placing candles with careful precision, insisting that each small flame be upright and steady.

I thought she simply loved Christmas. I didn't know I was witnessing her carry the history of Opelika with her, one tiny light at a time. Nor did I know I was living in her memory, that every candle signaled a place she loved and never quite left behind.

Then there was Miss Jane Walker's Christmas party, which my mother spoke of with reverence, as though it were a legend. *Southern Living* had once profiled it, proof enough, in her mind, of its worth. She was too young to attend, but I picture her, hovering at the edges, watching, absorbing, assembling a true Southern Christmas from hints and glimpses.

My father grew up in Columbus, Georgia, not far away, yet a different world entirely—no parade floats, no polite society parties. His Christmas gifts were tactile, boy-shaped: the GI Joe set, the

Auburn football jersey and uniform (he wanted to play for Auburn back then). But the gift he remembers most clearly was the machine gun.

Not a real one, of course, but an elaborate contraption meant for a nest or fort, the kind of toy made back before safety warnings covered every box in fine print. It swiveled. It had impressive mechanical features. And the moment my father got his hands on it, he advanced to the bushes in his front yard and prepared to defend his territory against all comers.

This is how he met the boy who would become Dr. Mark Adams.

Mark had made the mistake of entering my father's line of fire. There was a battle, a truce, and then a friendship that endured into adulthood. Mark became a famous pediatric urologist. My father submits, today, that a great many men and their private parts owe their continued functionality to Mark's surviving that morning assault.

These were my parents before they were my parents: a girl who loved luminaries, a boy who loved war games. Somehow, after both had moved to Atlanta in junior high and later reconnected at Auburn University, they married. They had children, and their separate Christmases merged into ours: a singular, intricate thing.

House in Opelika, Alabama, December 2025 (Allen Mendenhall)

Every year, my mother drove us to Phipps Plaza to see Santa. The event was captured on camcorder; those tapes now repose in some cabinet, gathering dust and quiet importance, too precious to destroy, too awkward to watch.

And every Christmas Eve, without fail, we went to church—first Mt. Vernon Baptist in Sandy Springs, later Johnson Ferry Baptist in Marietta—where we sang “Silent Night” by candlelight. It was the sort of service that would give a fire marshal the nervous sweats. One brave soul lit the first candle, then handed the flame to the next, and so on down the pews until the whole sanctuary shimmered in soft, quivering light. It was beautiful, certainly, but

also perilous. Still, we did it every year because tradition always wins, and some things are worth the risk of setting your neighbor's hair alight.

I was a fearful child. I thought about death constantly, particularly after dark, and the weight of that terror was physical, a burden I carried alone. But I remember one Christmas Eve service at Mt. Vernon when the fear simply lifted. I can't explain it except to say that I felt safe—profoundly, mysteriously safe—surrounded by candlelight and voices and my family and all those other families, all of us singing together in the dark. For a brief hour, the light made the world seem gentle, and I could breathe without the shadows pressing against me.

Every Christmas morning followed the same script. My parents made us wait at the top of the stairs. Had Santa come? What did we think? My father would go downstairs alone to investigate, and he'd call up the report: Yes. Yes, Santa had come. The miracle had occurred again.

The year of the canoe, though—that was different.

My parents had a problem. Our house offered no nook, cranny, or shadowed corner large enough to conceal a canoe from the prying eyes of three industrious children. So, they did what Southerners always do when life presents an obstacle: They consulted the neighbors.

Walt and Sherry—whose last name I can still pronounce but have never managed to spell—lived next door and had no children of

their own. They joined the plot with cheerful secrecy, stashing the canoe in their basement as if sheltering contraband. Perhaps being childless made them eager to borrow a little of someone else's Christmas magic, or maybe they were simply kind. Either way, they guarded the canoe—and our illusion—with admirable devotion.

Christmas morning arrived with the usual spread of presents under the tree, but nothing that resembled a watercraft. We noticed nothing amiss; there was nothing to notice.

Then my father, with great solemnity, announced that Santa must have struggled with the narrow chimney this year. Perhaps, he suggested, we ought to check our basement. We did. And there the canoe gleamed, a revelation worthy of our every whispered wish.

Recently, I asked my mother about her favorite Christmas memory; she didn't hesitate. Neither did my father. Nor my sister. Nor my brother. Each one of them said the same thing: the canoe. That Christmas, that morning, that revelation.

We lived on a pond, which meant the canoe wasn't decorative; it was serviceable, necessary, ours. For twenty-five years, we used it. We fished from it. We had wars with it, launching pinecones and baseballs and tennis balls at each other, those battles as fierce and forgiving as childhood itself. We capsized a few times. We caught a great many fish. That canoe became part of the landscape of our growing up, so familiar we stopped noticing it, the way you stop seeing things that will always be there.

Except it wasn't always there.

When my parents sold the house, right before the COVID pandemic, and downsized to a landlocked property nearby, they left the canoe behind for the new owners—just left it in the backyard like a piece of furniture too big to move, like something that belonged to the pond more than to us. I wonder sometimes whether the new family uses it, whether they know its history, and whether it means anything to them.

My father, for all his virtues, was legendarily bad at buying gifts for my mother. The Bose clock radio incident lives in family infamy. He presented it to her with pride—a beautiful, expensive radio—and she was furious because she presumed, as did the rest of us, that he had really bought it for himself and merely written her name on the card for propriety's sake. My father, pressed on this point, claimed he had prayed about it and God had told him to buy the Bose radio.

My mother was unconvinced by this allegedly divine intervention.

The radio's true beneficiary, as it turned out, was our cat, clumsily named Big Kitty after the arrival of Little Kitty so that they might be distinguished with minimal effort.

Big Kitty quickly discovered that she could step on the round button on top—the one that turned the thing on—and she employed this knowledge with stubborn discipline. If my parents dared sleep past the hour she deemed respectable, she would march to the nightstand and activate the radio at full volume, rousing

them so they would attend to the only matter she considered urgent: her breakfast.

After that Christmas, my little sister, Ansley, took over the responsibility of choosing Mom's Christmas presents; domestic harmony was restored. Some people are gifted at knowing what other people need. My father is not one of these people. My sister is.

My mother made buttermilk pie during the holidays, using a recipe from an Aunt Bee cookbook—yes, that Aunt Bee, from Mayberry, from the Andy Griffith Show.

That a recipe from a fictional character in a fictional town became a real tradition in our real family seems perfectly reasonable to me now. In the South, the line between myth and memory has always been negotiable, particularly at Christmas.

Then came the year—fifteen years ago, maybe, though time collapses in on itself as you age—when my brother and I announced that we would make the buttermilk pie.

My brother and I do not bake. We have many skills between us, but this is not among them. So, when we rolled up our sleeves and pulled out the Aunt Bee cookbook, the family gathered to watch as spectators do when a potential disaster is on the horizon.

The females laughed at first. Then they grew quiet as we measured flour and sugar with uncharacteristic competence. They grew nervous, moreover, as we actually seemed to know what we were

doing. When the pie came out of the oven golden and perfect and better than any buttermilk pie I'd ever tasted, I felt a strange electricity in the room. The women—my mother, my sister, my then-wife—seemed torn between pride and something that looked suspiciously like jealousy. We had invaded their territory and, against all odds, triumphed.

It's a small story, the buttermilk pie. But it sits alongside all the other small stories—the luminaries, the machine gun, the canoe, the Bose radio—and together they form something larger. A Christmas. A family.

I've been thinking about what makes these memories Southern and not just memories. Children everywhere wait for Santa, and families everywhere have their traditions, and Christmas is Christmas whether you're in Alabama or Alaska. But Southern Christmases carry their own particular weight: the crisp December light, the slow burn of magnolia-scented evenings, the insistence that certain foods, lights, and rituals endure, and the way neighbors peek through shutters to greet one another on winter nights.

The South holds onto Christmas the way it holds onto everything else: with both hands, with fierce tenderness, with a refusal to let go even when letting go would be easier. We carry our small-town parades into our suburban neighborhoods. We learn recipes and pass them down like heirlooms. We light the same luminaries our mothers lit, and their mothers before them, paper bags filled with

sand and hope and the dogged belief that some lights should never go out.

And some lights never do.

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What I understand now, at a distance I didn't have as a child searching the December sky for Santa's sleigh, is that Southern Christmas is an act of defiance and devotion both. We take what was given to us—the parades, the parties, the church services, the family recipes—and refuse to let them die. We adapt them to new places and people, but we keep them alive. We're remembering *and* insisting. We're saying that the past matters, that the ancestors who came before us matter, that the South they knew and the South we know are connected by something more than geography or time.

That canoe, floating now on a pond where different children play, being used (or not) by a family that didn't know my father's machine gun stories or my mother's luminary dreams—that's Southern Christmas, distilled to its essence.

We don't hold on forever, but we hold on long enough to matter. We pass things forward with the hope that they'll be loved again, used again, remembered again. We light our candles and sing our songs and make our pies and leave our gifts behind, trusting that the next family will understand, will feel what we felt, will know what we knew.

Christmas, for us, isn't just a day, but devotion itself. Memory, for us, isn't just preservation, but transformation. The South we carry with us—in luminaries and toy guns and hidden canoes and buttermilk pies—is not the South that was, but the South that is, and the South that will be, as long as we keep lighting the candles, as long as we keep telling the stories, as long as we maintain that some things, the beautiful things, should never be allowed to fade into the darkness.

We light the flame and fear no shadows.

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