



## LOWCOUNTRY MUSINGS

December 2018

### A JOURNAL THROUGH TIME

By Florence Bothwell Cosby

*December*



*Whose woods these are I think I know.  
His house is in the village, though;  
He will not see me stopping here  
To see his woods fill up with snow.*

≈

*The woods are lovely, dark, and deep,  
But I have promises to keep,  
And miles to go before I sleep,  
And miles to go before I sleep.*

*Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening ~ Robert Frost*

*California Dreamin' ~ The Mamas & The Papas*

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dN3GbF9Bx6E>



The packages have started to arrive! Yesterday, UPS delivered before noon—his usual time is early evening—and this morning FedEx was here at 7:45 a.m. David happened to be in the yard to greet the



since—more than fifty years now. But fitted-sheet folding pretty much mirrors Cati's and my distinctly different personalities—I am measured, calm, and carefully organized, while she is impulsive, spirited, and creative on her own terms. To her, a folded fitted sheet is more of an abstract soft sculpture—a work of art in a very fluid sense.



Yesterday's [Dictionary.com](https://www.dictionary.com) Word of the Day was *Xanadu*, meaning a place of great beauty, luxury, and contentment. It is derived from the Mongol city founded by Kubla Kahn in the 1620s, and is an anglicized form of Shang-tu, the site of his summer residence in southeast Mongolia. The connection of that city to the sense of a dream place of magnificence and luxury comes from the poem by Samuel T. Coleridge—*Kubla Kahn; or, A Vision in a Dream – A Fragment* (completed in 1797, but not published until 1816).

*In Xanadu did Kubla Kahn  
A stately pleasure-dome decree:  
Where Alph, the sacred river, ran  
Through caverns measureless to man  
Down to a sunless sea.*

Apparently, Coleridge composed the poem one night when he was in an opium-induced dream state after reading a work describing the actual summer palace at Xanadu. Upon awakening from his drugged stupor, he set about writing what he remembered of his dream, but when interrupted, he lost his focus and could not recall the rest of the lines of poetry from the dream. Thus, feeling that the poem was unfinished, it remained unpublished, with Coleridge reading it only privately to friends, until encouraged to publish it as is.



When we first lived in Santa Barbara, a French bakery opened in an up-scale shopping area in Montecito. It was called Xanadu Bakery, with an intended reference to opulence and grandeur. The pastries and other food offerings were, indeed, sumptuous and luscious, but with a price tag to match. This, also, was a time in California when marijuana was emerging as a recreational drug of choice, and so there was a subtle undertone of a Coleridge-like state of illicit pleasure within the bakery's premises. David and I ate there probably only once, at the invitation of friends who picked up the inflated check. We did enjoy the fine pastries and specialty gourmet coffee—a new concept on the culinary scene at that time. Xanadu Bakery remained operational for more than 30 years in Montecito, until a destructive fire caused it to close for good. But even these many decades later, the mere sound of the word *Xanadu* recalls an image of luxury, indulgence, and an exotic experience that lies just beyond ordinary reach.

*And close your eyes with holy dread  
For he on honey-dew hath fed,  
And drunk the milk of Paradise.*



Because today is National Microwave Oven Day, I was reading a bit about its invention and first appearance on the retail market. Apparently, the heating capabilities of microwave technology were discovered accidentally when a Raytheon engineer was working with active radar in 1945 for defense purposes and noticed that the candy bar he brought to work each day in his shirt pocket kept melting from the heat of the microwaves. He then changed direction in his research and pursued experimenting with different methods of safely heating food with microwaves. His employer, the Raytheon Company, filed a patent later that year, and built the first commercially available microwave oven in 1947—called the *Radarange*. It was huge in size and took up an entire counterspace. Since then, microwave ovens have evolved in efficiency, appearance, and size, including many that are permanently installed in the hood space above a kitchen stove. We have had several microwaves over the years, from an early large model at first, to the smaller compact size we have now. Although we rarely cook a meal in it, we do use it for heating leftovers or prepared foods.



The first *Radarange* that I remember was in the kitchen of a friend's father, who was an avid cook and gadget collector. His was huge and placed on a rolling cart designed for that purpose—to house the appliance and to store it in a designated space of its own. David and I were at his home in Indiana with our friends Steve and Judy for Christmas Day dinner. Burnes—our friend Judy's father and our host—was preparing one of the most delicious pork roast holiday feasts I have ever tasted. Microwave cooking was touted as a time-saving approach to meal preparation, so Burnes roasted the pork in the microwave rather than in his standard oven, thus reducing the time needed to complete it. The pork roast had been prepared with slits cut in the meat and then each slit stuffed with a sliver of prune or dried apricot. While the meat rested, he again used his microwave to quickly heat his many sides—sweet potato casserole, fresh lima beans from his summer garden and stored in his chest freezer, baked apples, gravy, and others. The holiday table was a bounty of savory goodness, all begging to be sampled and passed again for seconds. What I remember most about the meal was that everything tasted so phenomenally scrumptious that I overate enormously. To my horror, the zipper in the waist of my holiday skirt burst its seams right there at the table! But clothing disaster aside, I don't think I have ever enjoyed a Christmas Day dinner as much as that *Radarange* feast from Burnes's kitchen.



I was surprised and pleased to discover a day this month designated as Weary Willie Day, honoring the memorable character portrayed by Emmett Kelly. Kelly created a sad, down-on-his-luck clown that was the direct opposite of the usual bright-faced goofy persona expected of clown characterizations. During the Great Depression, Weary Willy mirrored the trying times facing the nation and the despair of people caught in its grips, with his shadowy beard, his beaten expression, and his torn and tattered costume—the hobo clown. But this portrayal remained when good times returned, and Weary Willie ultimately became an iconic face and a major attraction at the Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus. Instead of going for a laugh as clowns are expected to do, Weary Willie always appealed for sympathy from his audience.



I have many vivid memories of the world-renowned Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus performances at Madison Square Garden when I was young. It was another of our annual outings organized by my mother and including other families in the neighborhood. We always had wonderful seats in this enormous venue, where we could hang over the railing to view the multiple acts presented simultaneously in all three-to-five rings on the circus floor. Each show was preceded by a signature solo act by Emmett Kelly on the side of the arena, like the warm-up acts at the beginning of most live musical concerts. In his skit, Weary Willie walks out from the sidelines with a broom in his hand, only to discover a large blue patch on the floor, projected from an overhead spotlight. He steps into the spot of light, but finds he is unable to escape that light, as it follows his footsteps from one place to another. Weary Willie begins to sweep the offending spot of light into a smaller circle, then carefully steps out of it and back onto the unlit floor. His mistake is when he takes his broom, raises it above his head, and slams it down on the tiny spot of light—which immediately spreads back to its original size. He then repeats his sweeping and his spot-slamming eradication efforts several times again, but to no avail. The crowd roars with laughter at his plight and at the defeated and sorrowful expression on his face. Finally, with the blue spot once more swept into a tiny spot, he slyly and cleverly sweeps the spot off to the side, lifts the corner of a patterned throw rug, and makes one final sweep that propels the spot under the rug and out of sight. It is a classic gag-skit, repeated at the start of every circus performance I enjoyed at MSG.

The story of Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus life is immortalized in the movie *The Greatest Show on Earth* from 1952. We happen to have borrowed a copy from the library the other day, and when we discovered it was Weary Willie Day, we scheduled it for our tonight's movie choice. Emmett Kelly makes a guest appearance in the film as his character Weary Willie, a performance we are eager to see again and to relive the enjoyment from when we were kids.



We made annual visits to Madison Square Garden as kids to see the Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus for a spectacular performance at this enormous venue. The arena is indoors, with permanent seating for thousands of spectators. When the circus came to town, the space was readied with three rings and aerial equipment, all securely erected without concern for weather or elements. Many of the performers—both world-class acts and minor fill-ins—became regularly featured stars for years of participation. I recognized many of these same acts from my childhood in the movie *The Greatest Show on Earth*—the circus parade with its elaborate costumes, the faces of the clowns, the skillful acrobats, animal tamers, and aerialists, all providing a magnificent show for “children of all ages.” I loved our childhood visits to MSG for the circus.



When Cati was a young girl, perhaps around five- or six-years-old, I took her to the Earl Warren Show Grounds in Santa Barbara to Circus Vargas, which performed in a traditional circus arena—the canvas “big top,” with pointed peaks and flapping flags, erected on location for the duration of the time the circus was in town. The space was relatively small, but with ample room for the requisite three rings and aerial trappings. The seats were portable sections of folding wooden chairs on a plank floor. Cati and I had seats in the front row and thus were close to the ground-level performers. I remember that when the elephant parade entered running into the lane that circled the edge of the arena, we felt a gush of air on our faces as their hulking bodies trotted past. Even I gasped at the spine-tingling sensation of it all.



Years later when Cameron was a small boy, we took him to the Loomis Brothers Circus that makes its rounds through the southern and mid-Atlantic states, performing locally at the North Charleston Coliseum. This, too, is a permanent structure, but much smaller in scale than MSG. But the circus had the same kind of parade, the same array of acts, and the same vibrant feeling that any circus projects, no matter its size. What we especially liked was that prior to the opening performance, children and families were invited into the center ring to meet the elephants, to touch their hide, to feel the enormity of their presence, even though they were small as elephants go. Cameron loved the show—the glitz and the glamour, the dazzling excitement of the pulsing music, and the flashy acts.



Of all my thrilling circus experiences over the years from child to adult, the most memorable was at our visit to this most recent one. We had seats in the front row and had spread out to accommodate another family we had joined there. The others were in the ring visiting the elephants, and Cati was seated about four seats off to my left. Several performers, including clowns, roamed the stands to greet the arriving spectators and warm them up to the anticipated show. One clown rambled over to Cati and mutely began his silly act to make her laugh, as clowns are intended to do, and to which she readily responded, with smiles and giggles of silly glee. The clown leaned in towards her and whispered something that made her smile and giggle even more. (Remember—she was not a kid; she was an adult here.) Then the clown approached me, several seats away. Although clowns are not supposed to speak when they are in their clown makeup, this one spoke to me. He asked if that was my daughter sitting down the row, and I acknowledged that she was. He then went on to tell me that he thought she was beautiful, and that he had asked her to marry him. He eagerly awaited my reaction, to which I replied: “Well, I always knew one day she’d bring home a clown.” To my utter delight, he threw back his head and heartily laughed out loud, and to this day I am proud of the fact that *I* had made a clown laugh.

David has given me a potted poinsettia for every Christmas that I can remember. This year's plant is especially pretty—deep red, large, and full. Even before I learned that it was discovered and named for a native South Carolinian, I have loved the tradition of a poinsettia plant for Christmas.



*The poinsettia was named after Joel R. Poinsett, a native Charlestonian, who first saw them on a trip to Mexico in 1825 as the United States' first minister there. An avid botanist, Poinsett found the colorful flower for sale in every marketplace. Mexicans called it "The Flower of the Holy Night" because it was at the height of its brilliance on December 25. Poinsett examined the plant and discovered that the bright red displays were not blossoms but bracts—petal-like leaves. The true flower of the plant is the tiny but vivid yellow cluster at the center. Amid political dissent, Poinsett was forced to leave Mexico City on Christmas Day 1829, taking with him cuttings of the wildflower that to Mexicans was simply a weed—except at Christmastime. And thus, the now-beloved Christmas plant has become a standard tradition to holiday decorating. (from "Losing a Friend" by me)*

When we lived in Santa Barbara, we saw poinsettias growing wild on hillsides, as huge native shrubs with the brilliant scarlet bracts often a foot in diameter on the end of stems taller than I am. At Christmastime, I would cut armloads of them to decorate our apartment for the holidays in our Mediterranean-like climate. We had a long breakfast bar that ran the length of the kitchen and which faced out into the living area. We covered the bar with a holiday table runner, then arranged the poinsettia cuttings along its length, interspersed with huge Coulter Pine pinecones—the largest species of pinecones in California—as a festive floral arrangement for our annual Christmas party with friends and co-workers. The poinsettia display provided a dramatic backdrop to our Santa Barbara holiday buffet, as does the lovely plant from David that decks our chopping-block table in the dining area of our Summerville house today. A vivid harbinger of the holiday season ahead.



Most folks around here put up their outdoor Christmas decorations the day after Thanksgiving. That's a bit early for me. I seem to recall that in the northeast where I grew up, we were a bit closer to Christmas Day, and certainly well into December, before we decked the halls—and roofs, and doors, and fences, and garden trees. We seem to have slipped into the habit of somewhere in between—mid-December at the earliest. So, David and I took some time today to decorate the front yard—lighted garlands along the top fence railing, red velvet bows, and of course Norman.



When Cameron was young, and we were all living on James Island together, we hung lavish decorations all over the house and the outside yards and doors. He loved the lights, especially the year his mom had

a light-string explosion and draped yards and yards of colored lights up the trunks and around the branches of the trees along the driveway and front yard. She explained that it was a burst of Kandinsky enthusiasm, referring to one of her favorite abstract artists. At that time, we bought a large *blow mold light up snowman*, which was taller than our two-year-old grandson. A year later, when we were pulling out the boxes and tubs of holiday decorations, Cameron was quite upset that we had not yet retrieved “Norman” from the attic. We couldn’t figure out what he was talking about—who was this “Norman” character? And then it dawned on us—in his toddler-learning-language speech, he was actually saying what he believed was the word “snowman.” Well, to this day, our outdoor snowman decoration is called “Norman” and he still takes pride of place at the end of the front fence next to the sidewalk, welcoming one and all at our holiday entrance.



The [Dictionary.com](https://www.dictionary.com) Word of the Day is *tidings*—news, information, or intelligence. Whereas I do know its meaning, I have never used this word in my writing or speaking. For me, the word *tidings* is associated with the Christmas carol *God Rest Ye Merry Gentlemen*, also known as *Tidings of Comfort and Joy*. It is one of the oldest of the Christmas carols still sung today, dating back to the 16<sup>th</sup> century or perhaps even earlier:

*God rest ye merry, gentlemen,  
Let nothing you dismay,  
Remember, Christ our Savior  
Was born on Christmas day,  
To save us all from Satan’s power  
When we were gone astray:  
O tidings of comfort and joy,  
Comfort and joy  
O tidings of comfort and joy.*

*Tidings* also means the announcement of a great event, as in the Christmas story in the Bible (KJV) when the angel of the Lord appeared before the shepherds keeping watch over their flock by night:

Luke 2:10 - *And the angel said unto them, Fear not: for, behold,  
I bring you good tidings of great joy,  
which shall be to all the people.*



*God Rest Ye Merry Gentlemen* ~ A Pentatontix Christmas  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ku7ohU1IGls>



Tonight is our family tree-trimming party. We will be reusing an artificial tree that Cati gave us last year, one that she had received second-hand from a friend, but which was way too large for her apartment, so she passed it on to us. We have always had a real tree, for more than 50 Christmases now, either selected from a seasonal tree vendor, a local nursery, or cut down ourselves in the woods of Maine. Last year was the first Christmas we did not have a real tree, but we were okay with that—they have become very expensive, and more importantly seem to be raised now without that distinctive piney fragrance that is integral to the season. To compensate for our absence of a real tree, however, Cati had given us a gift of a kit for growing our own live Christmas tree.



We began the process last January, nurturing the few seedlings that had propagated from sprouts in a small terrarium on our kitchen window sill. From those, we chose the strongest survivor and repotted it as directed for placement outside. That was back in March. Today it has nearly quadrupled in height, is shedding its lower needles from the stem to form the trunk and is sprouting its first major limb. In a year or two it will be strong enough for us to permanently plant it in the ground, perhaps along the back yard where other pine trees are flourishing. Of course we cleverly named it Dougie, to match its evergreen conifer species in the pine family—a Douglas-fir.



A Douglas-fir is native to western North America and was named for David Douglas, a Scottish botanist who first introduced it into cultivation in 1827. A Douglas-fir is considered a medium to extremely large evergreen, growing from 70 – 200 feet tall and can live up to 700 years old. Yikes! Our little guy has a ways to go, for sure.



Candy treats are in abundance at holiday time, with seasonal colors, flavors, and shapes. There are so many to choose from, but for me, hard candies take a front row for sweet-tooth pleasure.



My Aunt Emily never failed to bring our family the most unusual and delectable Christmas hard candies. It was the only time I saw ribbon candy—silky smooth flat strips that are folded back and forth over themselves to form a wavy strip. The finished product has a glossy sheen and a pure sugar taste with stripes of tangy lemon or spikey peppermint. My mother arranged the ribbon candy in a candy dish on a living room table because of its pretty appearance. It was like having a holiday decoration that was also delicious to eat. For Jack, Bob, and me there were usually swirly peppermint lollipops, the big ones that lasted forever and could be enjoyed a bit at a time, then saved for a few more licks another day. My mother also splurged on a bag of mixed hard candies, especially the ones with various holiday designs imbedded in each piece. Again, these treats found their way into a candy dish for their decorative as well as sweet appeal.



But top of my list for Christmas hard candy is anything that's peppermint. I like the ones that resemble fat pillows and seem to fit perfectly into the roof of your mouth for time-release minty freshness. Peppermint bark was not a confection choice when I was a kid, but I became an instant fan when Cati gifted me with a box from Williams-Sonoma when we lived on James Island. Even the attractive metal box was a treat to own, and each broken shard was rich with white and milk chocolates. Not completely a hard candy, but a tasty compromise for chocolate lovers as well. And of course, I cannot fail to mention the seasonal peppermint candy cane that was always tucked into my Christmas stocking as a child, as well as hung on the Christmas tree, or tied with a bow onto a holiday gift package.

I recently read an article in the online news listing *The Definitive Ranking of the Worst Christmas Holiday Candies*. I was quite taken aback, and perhaps even offended, because all of my favorite hard candies made the list! But other folks' opinions aside—there is absolutely nothing that will undermine my love of hard candies, especially when visions of sugar plums dance in my head.

I showed David the above-mentioned worst holiday candy list, and he, too, was heartily in disagreement.

- #11 – Peppermint candy canes 😊
- #10 – Old-fashioned hard candy mix 😊
- #9 – Ribbon candy 😊
- #8 – Candy canes – non-peppermint
- #7 – White peppermint M&Ms
- #6 – Lifesaver story books 😊
- #5 – Chocolate-covered cherry cordials 😊
- #4 – Peppermint bark 😊
- #3 – Peeps
- #2 – Reindeer corn 😊
- #1 – Christmas tree nougats



He remembered that his mother loved the chocolate-covered cherry cordials, so much so that she was not very pleased if called upon to share them. She liked the combination of chocolate shell, juicy maraschino cherry center, and the gooey syrup that oozed out when she bit into one. David also recalls the Lifesavers book that my mother gave him every year for Christmas, especially because of the variety of flavors included in the assortment. He kept them in his desk drawer where he could enjoy their hard-candy goodness whenever he liked, stretching out their consumption to last a long time. We both agreed that the holiday mix was high on our list, especially the raspberry-shaped ones that had a filled center that slowly seeped out when the hard shell had dissolved in your mouth. In fact, when we were out running errands today, we searched in three stores looking for Brach's Holiday Mix, but were disappointed that the stores we tried, both in person and online, were out of stock this close to Christmas Day. Nevertheless, we picked up a couple of bags of peppermint candy twists and placed them in our Christmas candy dish, on the dining room sideboard next to the poinsettia. I have already tried two of them, and they are more than delicious. So, once again, Worst List be damned.



A gingerbread house is a popular decoration for Christmas in the United States as well as parts of Europe. We never had or made gingerbread houses when we were kids. In fact, I don't recall even knowing anyone who did—perhaps not a popular holiday activity back then.

I remember only one gingerbread house that David and I had in Santa Barbara, which was store-bought as part of our holiday décor. We were more into the tradition when Cati was young, either one made from a kit with her grandma, or else a store-bought one received as a gift. Cati enjoyed the activity as a child and continued the tradition with Cameron when he was young—always fun for them to do together.



Sometimes she would buy the kit and other times they would construct their own out of simple ingredients from the grocery store. Set on a paper-plate base, the basic framework for the house was a milk carton, which was then faced with a graham-cracker siding and roof using tubs of ready-made icing. From there, Cameron would select from a variety of candies, cereals, and snack products to decorate their little house. The houses were enormously creative and meticulously executed from unsure little fingers that were covered with more confection than his house. But regardless of the ultimate appearance, over the years they all had one thing in common—tiny replicas of gingerbread houses constructed with a deliciously happy spirit.



Gingerbread baking has a rich tradition in medieval European culinary culture as a commonly-consumed baked good as well as decorative cookies elaborately designed for special occasions. Originally brought back to Europe by the Crusaders returning from the Middle East, the ground-up gingerroot used to spice the bread was not only tasty but helped preserve the product from early spoilage. The tradition of creating decorative houses from that gingerbread began in Germany in the early 1880s, as a result of the Grimm’s fairytale house in the story of Hansel and Gretel. After the book was published, German bakers began to recreate ornamental fairy-tale houses made from gingerbread with sugar confection decorations. These were especially popular at Christmastime, and the tradition spread to this country with the German-speaking immigrant communities who settled in Pennsylvania and Maryland.



The Annual National Gingerbread House Competition has been held in Asheville, North Carolina, since 1992, attracting bakers from around the country in four age groups—Child, Youth, Teen, and Adult. Except for the base, the structure must be constructed completely from edible materials. The main structure should be 75% gingerbread, with some of that uncovered and visible. The rest can be decorated and held together with any edible material, not limited to candies and icings. It is an awesome baking task that takes hundreds of hours to bake and construct and results in many beautiful and imaginative structures and environments—visions of fairy-tale art.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z-6EQRMQ-VU>



David is in the kitchen baking a classic Christmas stollen—a traditional German bread made during the holiday season. It is a sweetened yeast dough containing various candied fruits, folded in half, and finished with a brushing of melted butter and a double dusting of confectioners’ sugar. The baking of a Christmas stollen dates to 14<sup>th</sup> century Germany when an early version of the bread was baked as gifts to honor princes and church dignitaries. At first the dough was a simple mixture of yeast, water, and flour, but over the centuries richer ingredients have been added—butter, milk, sugar, spices, nuts, and candied fruit. One legend of the Christmas stollen is that the fold on top of the dough represents the hump on the back of the camels which brought the Magi to Bethlehem, and that the various candied fruits represent the precious jewels and gifts carried in the camels’ packs.



My German grandmother Marie was an avid baker and of course included *Weihnachtsstollen*—Christmas Stollen—in her vast repertoire of seasonal baking. Although my mother remembered it with great fondness from her childhood, she did not herself venture into the preparation of a home-baked one when I was a kid. However, there always was a Christmas stollen in our house for the holidays. Usually it was from a local bakery, wrapped in parchment paper and tied with red and white baker's twine. But often another loaf arrived as a gift to my father from one of the passengers on his bus route. This was more elaborately wrapped, with holiday gift paper and a festive bow.



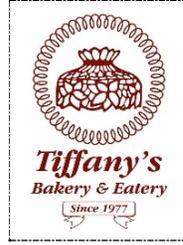
David and I began baking a classic Christmas Stollen early in our marriage, when we were eager to try new and exciting recipes, especially those with complex directions and exotic ingredients. We purchased each of the dried fruits and nuts separately from Kaiser's Health Food Store in Santa Barbara, carefully measured from stocked bins. The dough was then painstakingly prepared, kneaded, shaped, folded, and baked into our jewel-like holiday loaf. So, today we are returning to that tasty tradition from the past. The house is redolent of its inviting aromas, as we eagerly await the enjoyment of unique deliciousness on Christmas Eve morning.



## *The Night Before Christmas*



Cati, Cameron, Brie, and of course Roxi the Dog will be here on Christmas Eve for dinner and our present exchange. We are all eagerly looking forward to this joyous family gathering. For us this holiday festivity has always taken place on Christmas Eve, allowing Christmas Day for extending our various celebrations to other families and friends.



In the past David has spent hours and days preparing food for our Christmas Eve dinner, but in recent years as our energy levels and stamina seem to dwindle, we have given him the gift of a no-cooking dinner—and thus began a new tradition for us of ordering take-out Chinese food, with lots of special dishes on our table, prepared to our order by someone else. Cati will be bringing holiday pastries from a friend's bakery shop in Columbia to add to the bounty. A happy day and evening ahead!



Several years ago when Cati was Kitchen Manager at a restaurant here in Summerville, she discovered that three of her cook staff had nowhere to go on Christmas Day. PJ had no family at all, Danny's dad was too far away to travel, and Moe is Jewish and usually stayed at home alone. So she decided to host a Christmas Day dinner for People Who Have Nowhere to Go. As word spread of the impending gathering, she was given contributions of food for the planned buffet. The restaurant's food supply company gave her a turkey, the restaurant owner pitched in a ham, and everyone attending agreed to bring a side dish of some sort. She set up a buffet table in the dining area of her little house and borrowed a tablecloth and serving pieces from me. As word continued to spread of the now-elaborate feast, other co-workers and friends asked if they, too, could join the festivities after their own family visits. That first year she had about 15 people stop by, and as she continued the tradition in years to come, she eventually wound up with as many as 40 folks popping in to share in the holiday food and fun.



When I was growing up on Robinson Avenue, the countdown to New Year's Eve began way before the Times Square ball dropped. My Mother the Event Planner was already busy on the phone calling the select group of neighbors who would be participating in the annual festivities. Each year, the party began at around 8:00 pm at a specified house, then each hour the revelers would move on to a different house in the neighborhood. They would arrive at the fourth designated destination just before midnight. My mother would remind everyone of the plan, the beginning house and order of rotation, and especially who would host the grand finale midnight supper.



Our parents would arrange for us to be group-baby-sat by a couple of the older kids or someone's grandma, so that they could head off to join the gala evening ahead. The moms would dress up in fancy party dresses and their best high heels, with hair coiffed, and sprayed with scent. Our dads would wear their good suits and holiday ties, and sometimes add a top hat, spats, cane, or other fun throwback to eras past. There were usually about 14-18 adults on the chosen party list, who would all meet at the first designated house to begin the merriment. A drink and a small snack were served at each house, then everyone would move on to the next house in the rotation for another drink and small snack. For midnight celebrating, the host parents prepared a light buffet supper and toasting drinks. My mother had a supply of vintage noise makers to help ring in the New Year, ones that had been in her childhood family, and which I still have here in one of my boxes of keepsakes. But that was nowhere near the end of the party, as everyone would move on to yet another house for dessert and coffee. The entire night was filled with good cheer, overindulging, boisterous singing, lively dancing, and exuberant celebrating, all within the safety of our neighborhood. When we kids were grown enough to be partying ourselves, we always accepted an outside invitation to a friend's party or a community dance, but we also always managed to get back home to finish off the evening with our neighborhood families. No one who experienced a New Year's Eve Extravaganza on Robinson Avenue/Oakdale Street ever wanted to ring in the New Year anywhere else. It was the best.

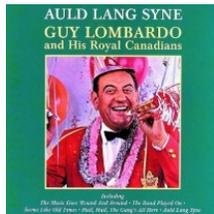


The Times Square ball drop on New Year's Eve was a prominent event for us growing up on Staten Island. Although we lived in a then-rural section of the Borough of Richmond, we were well aware of the various happenings that took place in "The City" throughout the year. The ball drop was broadcast live on TV and became the showcase of midnight celebrations around our neighborhood on New Year's Eve. Our parents toasted to it at their grown-ups' party, and we watched it as well when we were old enough to be awake and sitting in our pajamas in front of a black-and-white TV set. To us, the dropping of the ball was integral to marking the passing from one year to the next. As older kids, at our own parties, the ball dropping continued to be central to the evening. It marked the moment with tradition and fanfare. I have never traveled into Manhattan to join the throngs of revelers in Times Square at the appointed minute of the ball drop, as it was usually too cold to be fun, too crowded to be comfortable, and too cordoned off to permit freedom of movement or even finding a restroom. But I have never missed watching it on TV.



Also central to New Year's Eve on Robinson Avenue was the singing of the classic song *Auld Lang Syne*. Canadian band leader Guy Lombardo helped make it a New Year's Eve tradition in the United States, and

my mother resolutely continued this custom. She had an old vinyl record that she dusted off each year and toted to wherever midnight happened, to be played while neighborhood friends toasted the ball drop and sang in the New Year, accompanied of course by Guy Lombardo. I remember my mother steadfastly following this sequence of New Year's Eve ritual throughout her life right up until the end—party with friends and family, watch the ball drop in Times Square, sound the noise makers, yell “Happy New Year!” with spirit, and sing *Auld Lang Syne* with gusto, all the while toasting with champagne or ginger ale.



*Robert Burns*



The song *Auld Lang Syne* is widely attributed to a poem written in 1788 by the Scottish poet Robert Burns, and set to the music of a traditional folk tune. The title phrase means *old times*, especially those with fond memories. The song looks back over happy days of the past, and then welcomes a reunion with close friends and loved ones to remember those good times shared together. It is intended to evoke the happiness of memory, rather than the sadness of what is over and gone.

*Should auld acquaintance be forgot,  
And never brought to mind?  
Should auld acquaintance be forgot  
And auld lang syne?*

*For auld lang syne, my jo,  
For auld lang syne,  
We'll tak' a cup o' kindness yet,  
For auld lang syne.*

Guy Lombardo Orchestra ~ *Auld Lang Syne* (New Year 1946)

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A\\_SrZBIHr2k](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A_SrZBIHr2k)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sPfrBxHgLmA> (New Year's Eve - 1957)



I have found that the words of *Auld Lang Syne* are an appropriate ending to a year of journal writing, befitting Burns's haunting sentiment—to keep the past from fading. And so, on New Year's Eve I bring closure and honor to the many cherished memories that, in the pages and images of *A Journal Through Time*, will never be forgot.



*From January to December  
We will have these moments to remember.*

≈

*Though summer turns to winter  
And the present disappears  
The laughter we were glad to share  
Will echo through the years.*

≈

*When other nights and other days  
Have found us gone our separate ways  
We will have these moments to remember.*

Moments to Remember ~ The Four Lads

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VOc7L7tYLNE> (Original group – 1955)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hnk1rA4BJ3I> (Current group – 2014)

*Frank Busseri is the only remaining original member of the group (shown on the left in the 2014 video) and is well into his 80s. The other members of the current group look even older but can still carry the tune. The high notes are a bit of a strain but memorable just the same, much like the good old days.*

∞

*What is ahead for us in 2019...*

My grandson Cameron will turn 21 in the spring. He continues to attend college locally and plays men's league basketball at the "Y", where he has been a member for more than ten years now. Although he no longer lives with us, he lives nearby, and we see him often.



My daughter Cati has opened a new restaurant in Columbia, which she was instrumental in designing and equipping to her own specifications. Finally, at age 41 she is getting her Barbie Dream Kitchen.



Cameron's girlfriend Brianna will graduate this spring with her RN degree, and transfer to the Medical University of South Carolina (MUSC) to pursue her BSN. She is an important part of our family.



My husband David will turn 75 this year. He spends much of his active time photographing wildlife habitats, birds, and cityscapes of the Lowcountry. At home he continues to enjoy his love of cooking for our family.



Now that my *Journal* is complete, one of my next projects includes researching our family tree and compiling an historic narrative of our various ancestors—a family legacy for Cameron.



*We have much to look forward to and I hope that you do as well.  
May the year ahead bring happiness, good health, and new adventures for all of you.*



*Fini*

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