

PHILIP GULLEY

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# Christmas in Harmony



**Christmas in Harmony**

By Philip Gulley

My first memory of Christmas was in 1966. I was five years old and standing in line at Kivett's Five and Dime with my mother and brother, Roger, waiting to see Santa Claus, who looked suspiciously like Bud Matthews, the man in our town who did odd jobs. He smelled like Bud Matthews, too -- a blend of Granger pipe tobacco, Old Spice aftershave, and sawdust.

For a while, I believed Bud Matthews was Santa, and that he spent the off-season in our town patching roofs and fixing screen doors. Bud Matthews was jovial, like Santa, and had a bushy white beard. His wife looked like Mrs. Claus on the Coca-Cola calendar at the Rexall. Except they had a son named Ernie, who was in my grade, and everyone knew Santa didn't have any kids, just elves and reindeer. Then when I was eight, Uly Grant took me behind the school and told me that Santa was really your parents, which explained why, despite my persistent requests, I never got the Old Timer jackknife with a genuine bottle opener I'd asked for.

I needed the genuine bottle opener to open my pop bottles from Wilbur Matthews's garage next to the Dairy Queen. Wilbur was Bud's brother. I first met Wilbur at church. He was an usher and got to pick the boy who'd ring the bell to start the proceedings. I'd watch for his eye to settle on me and wait for his nod, which was the signal for me to slide out of my pew and fastwalk toward the foyer, where the rope dangled down from the bell.

"Pull her down a long ways," he'd say, "then let her go all the way back up. You'll get a good double ring that way."

The bell was made in 1885 in Baltimore. We got it cheap from the Episcopalians, who'd come to town in 1890 to establish an Episcopalian beachhead and convert the

masses. But they folded after two years, and we Quakers bought it at their auction. Wilbur's grandfather had installed it, then had passed the bell ministry on to Wilbur's father, who'd bequeathed it to Wilbur, who was childless. These days, Dale Hinshaw rings the bell every Sunday morning at ten-thirty, just as the Lord intended when He caused the Episcopalians to be vanquished so we could have their bell.

It was Wilbur's custom to climb the ladder up to the bell every Christmas Eve and view the town's Christmas lights. If the night were clear, he could see the star on top of the silo at Peacock's farm, two miles east of town. In my seventh year, Wilbur let me climb the ladder with him. He pointed out the star. I thought it was the star in the East, that the Baby Jesus had been born in the Peacocks' barn. I wondered why the Peacocks hadn't invited Mary and Joseph into their house to sleep on the foldout couch next to the freezer in the mudroom. Afterward, we'd retire to the basement and drink milk and eat Christmas cookies in the shape of angels Pastor Lindley's wife had baked downstairs while we were upstairs listening to him read the second chapter of the Gospel of Luke. The cookies were still warm and doughy, the milk so cold it hurt my teeth. If an angel head broke off while she was lifting a cookie from the cookie sheet, she'd put extra sprinkles on it and save it for me.

Pastor Lindley was a nice man, but seldom caused our faith to soar to new heights. If we wanted inspiration, we watched the Reverend Rod Duvall from Cleveland on Saturday nights after Lawrence Welk. We kept Pastor Lindley on because of his wife. We couldn't imagine tromping downstairs on Christmas Eve and eating hard, cold, store-bought cookies that crunched like gravel when you bit into them.

Though he was nice, Pastor Lindley had a few alarming tendencies, chief among them his sermons encouraging us to remember the reason for Christmas -- that it wasn't about presents and cookies, but about God sending his Son to be with us. I feared my parents might take his message to heart. I had nightmares about running down the stairs on Christmas morning to a tree with nothing under it, and my father sitting in his chair, a Bible balanced on his lap, smiling and saying, "Your mother and I have decided that this

year we're just going to thank God for the gift of his Son, because that's the only gift we really need."

The Christmas Eve service was, and still is, held at eleven-thirty. If we timed it right, we'd be biting into the cookies just as the Frieda Hampton memorial clock bonged midnight. My first four years, I came attired in pajamas, wrapped in a blanket, and slept through the entire proceedings. By my fifth year, my parents said I was big enough to stay up. I nodded off through the Gospel of Luke, but revived in time to eat cookies, which is my pattern to this day.

I have other memories of Christmas in Harmony. The men from the street department hanging plywood angels on the lightposts around the square. The Odd Fellows Lodge stringing Christmas lights back and forth across Main Street. The volunteer fire department hosing down the basketball court at the park so when it froze we could slide on the ice. Sorting through the pine trees at Grant's Hardware to find one with four good sides. Joe Bryant, who was a Jehovah's Witness and didn't believe in Christmas, telling me I was going to hell for celebrating it, but sneaking over to my house on Christmas afternoon to play with my toys. Next to Christmas, the day before the holiday break from school was the best day. We'd play games in the morning and sing Christmas carols in the gym with Mrs. Rogers, the music teacher. At lunch, Mrs. Sisk, the school cook, would serve us green ice cream in the shape of Christmas trees. After lunch, we'd march two abreast out the school door and up Washington Street to the Royal Theater and watch *Old Yeller* or *The Jungle Book*. We'd walk out of the dark into the sunlight, blinking our eyes. When Pastor Lindley read from Isaiah how people who walked in darkness had seen a great light, I thought he was talking about the movies.