

Christmas memory: Before a missionary family moved to Brazil

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It was Christmas.

The year was 1949, and my dad had been called only a few months before to be the pastor of First Baptist Church in Wharton.

This was significant because my mom and dad had applied to the Southern Baptist Foreign Mission Board the previous spring to be appointed missionaries to Brazil. They were told the process could take the better part of a year, if they were appointed at all.

So, when the call came from the church in Wharton, they were open and candid with the search committee about their hope to be missionaries soon. But the church called them anyway, and Dad and Mom accepted the call, and moved that summer from First Baptist Church in Wilmer, near Dallas.

Earliest memories ...

Some of my earliest memories are of the year—for the call from the Mission Board came in early 1950—Mom and Dad spent with the very warm and friendly church congregation at Wharton, and how they all welcomed my folks and me and my little brother David. Warm. Gracious. Loving. And they loved Dad's preaching, as all congregations he had pastored did—at Wilmer, at Baytown, at Beggs, Okla., and especially at Satin, when Dad was a young ministerial student at Baylor.

As the autumn months of 1949 turned to the upcoming Christmas season,

my parents were excited about having a special Christmas as a young family. They had arrived at a new church home, where their new salary no doubt would allow for a few things they could not afford growing up during the Depression, as a newly married couple during the War, and working through college and seminary.

I was 5½, and my memories of Christmas that year are special ones, indeed. I remember the young people and adults from the church coming to the pastor's residence, our home, to help decorate our beautiful and large tree—the largest I had ever seen—and being invited to tag along caroling at many homes in the city. And the hot chocolate and cookies served by homeowners were great!

And then came Christmas morning.

I still remember all the wonderful gifts Santa brought to David and me. A beautiful RCA Victor record player for children, with a cabinet and a space for albums. We played those albums over and over again until I had memorized all the songs and stories. I'm sure it drove Mom and Dad crazy.

I got a complete football uniform, leather helmet included, with a Baylor jersey bearing "19??" as my number, plus a real pigskin football. And then there was the Lionel electric train, with a locomotive engine with a whistle and a bell activated from the little transformer my Dad taught me how to use. And I'm sure many more gifts from my parents, grandparents and many people in our church.

The letter came in the spring of 1950 officially appointing Mom and Dad as missionaries to Brazil.

So, goodbyes had to be said to the wonderful people at Wharton, who were sad to lose their pastor so soon, but happy my folks' prayers had been answered and they were about to embark on a lifetime of doing God's work in another land with another people in another language, Portuguese, a

language Mom and Dad would learn in Brazil as adults.

And so it was that our small family sailed, along with eight other passengers, on a Delta Steam Lines freighter, the Del Sud, out of New Orleans on Sept. 7, 1950, on our way to Brazil, a trip that would take 17 days. We took all our belongings, either in our small stateroom or in the cargo hold; all the appliances and household items Brazilian customs would allow; all our clothes; our 1947 Chevrolet; and those special Christmas gifts and toys, especially the record player and the electric train, which would be such a big hit with my new friends I was to make in Brazil. But my new friends didn't know what to make of the American football uniform. These boys soon taught me right away their football game, the one we call soccer. I learned quickly, and I even got a soccer ball for Christmas later that year.

One more memory

Now, this story could be just another "I walked five miles every day in every weather to and from school" ancient history for an old man to pass down to grandkids and others. Except I have one more memory of that Christmas of 1949, and it was told to me by Mom several years ago before she passed away and joined Dad in their heavenly home.

I was visiting with Mom one crisp fall day at her home in Waco, and we were talking and reminiscing, as we frequently did, about "the good old days" and "cherished memories." The subject came to the upcoming Christmas season. We talked about the exciting anticipation of my grandchildren, her great grandchildren, as well as the eager anticipation of the parents and grandparents to see the smiles and share in the joys of the youngsters at their new gifts from Santa, in whom some of them still believed.

"You know," Mom said, "I remember back when you still believed in Santa."

"We were down in Wharton, and we had some extra money that year," she

added as she teared up. “And we thought we’d be going away to Brazil for five years before coming back to the States, so we wanted to get you and David some nice things to take with us to Brazil,” as I teared up as well.

“So your Dad and I left you and David with a lady from church and went on an all-day shopping trip to pick out some things for you boys. And after several hours and several purchases, I thought we had what we needed.

“But your Dad said, ‘No, I want to get Carl Wayne that new Lionel train he loves so much.’ So I said, ‘But Lester, you’ve always been on the more conservative side of Christmas gift giving, and this is all a bit too much.’”

And then Mom added, “But your Dad said, ‘I know, I know... but this is probably the last Christmas Carl Wayne will believe in Santa Claus, so I want him to have a really special Christmas this year.’ So that is how and why you received so many nice things that Christmas back in 1949.”

A lump in the throat ...

It was quite awhile before I could manage to say anything. It’s very hard to talk with a huge lump in your throat and tears streaming down your face. I never see an electric model train but that I think of my Dad and the warm heart that melted any vestige of his pastor’s or father’s feelings about going overboard that year for Christmas.

May your heart be warm this Christmas, and may you have a memory of a certain Christmas, and may it be warm and very special as well.

Merry Christmas, and I wish you peace.

Carl Bell, a former “missionary kid” and regent of Baylor University, is a member of Wilshire Baptist Church in Dallas.