

Christmas at Grandma's House

by Jason W. Hogue

Martha "Etta" Hogue was a retired third grade teacher who loved to host parties in her home. I lived with her for the most part of my teenage years. She wasn't a typical grandmother. She wasn't scared of the types of things you'd expect your grandmother to dislike. She was cool! She rode on the back of every motorcycle I owned back in those days, in fact she even rode with me when I test drove a race car. She'd say things like, "That's fast enough, isn't it?" but she'd say it long after it was fast enough. I'd do things like spin the back end around in a 180° turn and she would just smile. And I would smile, too.

Grandma's personality drew her friends and family to her home. We always wanted to hold events in her large, warm and inviting entertaining rooms—rooms that somehow felt as loving as Grandma's embrace. The main event room was a formal sitting area with antique furniture around the outside walls. One leather-topped coffee table with gold trim held a drawer full of Grandpa's Camel lighters collection.

"Stay out of the drawer, you kids!" Grandma would yell, but not it to be mean; she just didn't want the house to burn down.



Grandma working in her garden, always with a smile.

At Christmas time, Grandma's house smelled of cinnamon in one part of the house and sage in the other half. In the formal sitting room she would serve red hot apple cider steeped in a large stainless commercial coffee maker. Occasionally she would stir the mixture to melt the cinnamon candies at the bottom. I have never seen anyone else make her version of cider—it's been exclusive to Grandma's house at Christmas time.

Red Hot Apple Cider

1 Gallon – Apple Cider

1 1/4 Cup – Ferrara Pan Red Hots (You can find them at the Dollar Store.)

4 to 5 Medium – Cinnamon Sticks

- Etta's method: Use a commercial coffee maker that has never been used to brew coffee. Add all ingredients and heat for at least 3 hours stirring occasionally.
- Stove top method: Simmer apple cider with cinnamon sticks for approximately an hour. Add the red hots, stir until dissolved. Remove the cinnamon sticks, then serve. For extra spice, serve with extra red hots.
- Double boiler method: A double boiler would work well with this recipe. Bring the ingredients to a boil, then turn down the heat and allow it to simmer for a few hours. This method will dissolve the red hots slowly.

Her nativity scene was on an antique radio/record player cabinet and every grandchild would rearrange it as they walked by to the way they thought it should be laid out. Everyone had a different notion of where the cows should be, or the wise men with their camels should stand, or even where baby Jesus should lie.

In her kitchen, Grandma would fill a large pan (even wider than the countertop, painted ceramic blue with little white dots all over it) with cornbread and bread crumbs and then sprinkle sage all over it.

"Stir the sage into the dressing," she would instruct me. Then we'd work on the rolls. "Help me get the rolls made up into the muffin pan."

Oh my, those were not Marie Callender's rolls, they were the rolls you dream about at night—Grandma's famous bran yeast rolls. Together (she showed me how) we would roll three small balls into what would become delicious morsels.

Bran Rolls

1 cup – Shortening

1 cup – Boiling water

3/4 cup – Sugar

1 cup – All-Bran Cereal

1 1/2 teaspoon – Salt

1. Combined and stir the above ingredients until the shortening is melted. Then let the mixture cool to slightly warm.

2 packages – Dry Yeast

1 cup – Lukewarm water

2. Dissolve the yeast into the lukewarm water. When the bran mixture (from above) is cool to slightly warm, then add this yeast mixture.

2 – Eggs (beaten)

3. Add the 2 beaten eggs to the mixture. Mix well.

6 cups – All Purpose Flour

4. Add 2 cups of flour to the mixture and then start folding in the remainder of the flour a small amount at a time until all has been added.
5. Cover the bowl well and place it in the refrigerator overnight or at least for 4 hours before using.
6. Take out the desired amount and make into rolls to place in a greased muffin pan. (Etta would make 3 small balls for each muffin.)
7. Let rise for 1 hour.
8. Brush the top with butter then bake in a 425 degree oven for 15 to 20 minutes.

Of course, a ham and a turkey would be served. She always made a ham because Grandpa didn't like turkey (even after Grandpa had passed away she honored his wishes). And she would serve purple hull peas from the garden seasoned with bacon, a large casserole dish of cranberry salad to go with the fixings, and peanut clusters, cocoons, brownies, and divinity—a dessert to satisfy any sweet tooth.

Grandma would pull out her fine china from the hutch that had the 'Moss Rose' pattern on it, along with sterling silver utensils, which felt heavy to me when I was a kid. There was an "adult" table and then a separate table for children, but we all ate with the fine china and silverware. She collected salt dips and pewter spoons that went with them, a vintage way to serve salt. Each sitting would have its own salt dip with a few small pepper shakers placed throughout the middle of the table to share. Everything was perfect and you

could never imagine she could have done all this by herself, but she did except for a little help from grandkids like me.

Christmas felt special at Grandma's house, possibly because of the care she took in decorating every room and every detail of the house outside. Decorating started right after Halloween because she hosted Christmas parties for church groups and other groups in addition to our big family Christmas parties. Small elegant candlelit lamps, each with a glass chimney and red bow lined the brick walkway to the front door. They appeared to be metal, likely purchased from some upscale store on Fifth Avenue. (Years later we realized those elegant lamps were merely tuna cans nailed to wooden dowel rods and then painted black. The glass chimneys were small hurricane globes she bought at the store. Pinterest had nothing on my Grandma!) The white column on the front porch was wrapped in red ribbon like a giant candy cane holding up the roof. The carport wall exclaimed "NOEL" in giant wooden letters that Grandpa had carved, along with "H" on the back door, which stood for Hogue. Grandpa would make letters like this in his shop to give away as gifts. He also crafted wooden toys for the grandkids and walnut wooden bowls filled with nuts.

A large wreath made by a women's group at church hung on the back door, and the wreath I made for Grandma out of grapevines with fresh Holly leaves tied to it was on the front door. Every table in the house was dressed in tablecloths with Poinsettia patterns. There was a big Christmas tree in the living room with a train-themed tree skirt that had pockets filled with candy and small toys. There was also a green ceramic Christmas tree with multi-colored bulbs in the formal sitting room. My favorite Christmas tree was the gumball tree—a plastic Christmas tree with gumballs all over it sitting in the formal dining room (which was a room lined in red velvet walls)—as we ate the gumballs they would magically reappear. In the living room, there was a small red wagon with colorful spooky looking people dancing on the side. It was a wagon made in Costa Rica that my Grandpa bought when he was there helping to build a chemistry lab for Alcoa. After finishing work one day, Grandpa went shopping, and when he noticed the wagon he *had to have it* for Christmas, so he shipped it home. Next to the wagon, the fire in the fireplace would crackle and pop as the stockings Grandma made for each of us, personalized with our names, hung from the mantle.

We had more than just one Christmas celebration at Grandma's house: one with the immediate family, which included Grandma's two sons and their families, and another with the entire family, which included Grandma's nine sisters and a brother and their families. When it was just the immediate family we would spend the night so we could all wake up together on Christmas morning. (This is family time that I miss nowadays. Each family now stays home to do their own thing since we are without our matriarch to hold the family together.) My uncle Dowell would sleep in the back bedroom and my parents would sleep in the middle bedroom while all of the kids would sleep in sleeping bags on the floor of the formal sitting room. It was always hard to go to sleep with all that was going on in the house. Grandma would say her closet was off limits because that is where all the gifts were hidden and we all knew it. When we woke up on Christmas morning everything would be in place, the stockings all stuffed with goodies, the gifts placed under the tree and overflowing into the red wagon. We were always glad to open our own gifts but couldn't wait to get in our stockings. They would be filled with a deck of cards, a book of Lifesavers, nuts and fruit, and handfuls of candy in the toes.



Children fill Grandma's house at Christmastime.

At left: My dad, sister and me in 1972. At right: A houseful of cousins, 1980.

When all the family was there, the yard and road out front would be lined with cars and trucks. Families from all over the state and a few states away would be there. We would draw names to exchange gifts. Grandma always had male and female gifts set aside in a back closet, so if one of the family members brought along an extra friend they would not be left out. Grandma thought of everything, it seemed.

Grandma's father was 102 when he had his last Christmas with the family. He would give the kids an envelope with money in it and Bible verses written on the outside. After we could recite the Bible verses to him without looking, we could open the envelope and get the money. All the children in my family know this prayer and it has continued to be taught from family to family and generation to generation:

*God is great, God is good,
God lives in our neighborhood,
in our churches, in our homes and
in the hearts of our people. Amen.*



***Christmas during Grandma's early adult life.
Some of the people pictured here include:
her father, CJ Walker (5th chair on left);
Grandma between her two sons John & Dowell (2nd 3rd 4th chair on left);
and her sister, Betty Jo Stevens (4th chair on right).***

Grandma was the glue that held our family together. She made people feel welcome and at home. Her home was open to others and they held her in high regards as a host of a party and a friend. I would come home to find Grandma and the women from her Methodist church knitting or working on a quilt. Her home was always filled with activity and love.



Grandma hosts a yummy dinner, July 1979. That's me with the big grin.

When Grandma became ill with cancer, she didn't want things to change. She was in the hospital just before Christmas and told the family she just wanted to go home. We brought her home and the entire immediate family drew together and worked as hard as each of us could. We all slept over and had Christmas the way we always used to. That Christmas we did all the cooking and decorating of the house with help from Grandma telling us what went where and how it went.

"You remember when we all made these Christmas ornaments, Grandma?" someone asked. "Yes I remember when each one was made," she said with a big smile. She taught each of us to make things and to be good at it. Most of the ornaments were made by her grandchildren. The tree skirt she made, the red wagon, and her decorations are still brightening up our Christmas. But that year was her last Christmas with us; she passed away in January. By the smile on Grandma's face I know she was very happy to have spent that Christmas with all of us and she was happy to see her home in full bloom both decorated for Christmas and filled with her family.