

2

Christmas GIFTS

TRUE STORIES TO CELEBRATE THE SEASON



HELEN HEAVIRLAND
EDITOR



Pacific Press®
Publishing Association
Nampa, Idaho | www.pacificpress.com

CONTENTS



When Cookies Heal Hearts <i>Barbara Culley</i>	9
The Ugliest Christmas Tree <i>Ever</i> <i>Joseph M. Gale Sr.</i>	12
Countdown to Christmas With Prayer <i>Lydia E. Harris</i>	17
A Special Tree <i>Lana Hart</i>	20
Family for Dennis <i>Darlene Winter</i>	22
Fudge <i>Nancy Hoag</i>	26
A Christmas to Count On <i>Sarah Hope</i>	29
Too Many Places <i>Lillian Joyce</i>	34
The Repairer <i>Charles Earl Harrel</i>	38

Christmas Keepsake <i>Susan Brehmer</i>	41
His Reluctant Intercessor <i>Laura L. Bradford</i>	44
Snow and Ice and White-Knuckled Prayers <i>Bryan Ruby</i>	48
Love in a Pan <i>Michelle Adserias</i>	53
Helper on the Hill <i>Sharon Fischer</i>	56
Gifting the Spirit of Christmas <i>Nancy Hoag</i>	60
Christmas Memories That Matter <i>Helen Heavirland</i>	64
The Christmas That Changed Everything <i>Melinda Poling</i>	67
Handel's Magnificent <i>Messiah</i> <i>Lydia E. Harris</i>	71
Extended Christmas Joy <i>Maria King</i>	73
A Gift From Ashes <i>Karen Kristine</i>	76
Christmas in Tehran <i>R. P. Ferris</i>	81
Anticipation and the Three-Round Christmas Battle <i>Sarah Hope</i>	84

The Gift of No Regrets <i>Nancy Aguilar</i>	89
Ginger's Sorrow <i>Kim Hills Robinson</i>	92
Spreading Christmas <i>Nancy Hoag</i>	97
Conversation Under the Tree <i>Linda Highman</i>	100
Christmas in the Woods <i>Evelyn Groulik Visger</i>	102
A Holiday Tradition Worth Keeping <i>Charles Earl Harrel</i>	107
The Greatest Gifts <i>Rebecca Meek</i>	111
Christmas Grace <i>Sarah Hope</i>	114
The Year of the Christmas Oven <i>Marci Whitehurst</i>	118
Ripples <i>Helen Heavirland</i>	121
Your Turn	123
About the Authors	124

WHEN COOKIES HEAL HEARTS

Barbara Culley



How is it possible it's been more than thirty years since we started doing this?" I asked my friend, Dianne, as I moved sugar cookies from the hot cookie sheet to the cooling racks. The delicious scent of sugar, butter, and vanilla filled the warm room. Christmas music and decorations created the perfect backdrop for our mid-December holiday tradition of creating holiday treats for family and friends.

Dianne and I met when I started work in the admissions department of a local hospital after my college graduation. She was a young married woman whose husband was finishing his education. Over the years, Dianne and I formed a deep friendship. We shared our lives, commiserating and celebrating life's events. She was my matron of honor, and I babysat her daughter, Casey. We enjoyed adventures together—hiking, horse riding, shopping, and, of course, baking.

Each year, we selected recipes and doubled the multiple batches to split and create a great assortment to give to others. Some years we worked in her kitchen and sometimes in mine. Location became more challenging when my family moved across Puget Sound, putting a body of water between us, but the state ferry system kept us connected.

Happy memories of the annual event drifted through my mind, bringing a smile.

CHRISTMAS GIFTS

“Remember the year I caught you and Dianne dancing around the kitchen with the music blaring while you were baking?” my son asked. “I laughed so hard, but you guys just kept dancing.”

Another year, the snow and ice stopped travel. We canceled our plans, but we were not willing to break tradition. We baked separately and met a few days later in an icy parking lot to exchange cookies.

One year, when I stopped to pay for my ferry ride home after a full day of baking, the ticket taker inhaled the intoxicating aromas wafting through my car window. “I’d like to climb in,” he said with a smile. “Smells like a bakery!”

Of course, we had the inevitable mishaps: cookies left in the oven too long, dough not rising, or a new recipe that did not taste as good as expected. All disasters were met with laughter, sure to become part of the humor and history of decades of baking. For both families, the holiday would not be Christmas without our cookie extravaganza.

One November, Dianne and I met for lunch to make holiday plans. We did not know her doctor’s visit that afternoon would start an alarming downhill slide to her death two months later. Cancer.

The following Christmas, the thought of baking alone knotted my stomach with pain. The loss felt like daggers thrust into my heart. But Dianne’s daughter, Casey, caught me by surprise. She asked, “Would you be willing to continue the cookie baking tradition you shared with my mom?”

A bittersweet ache flooded my heart. Could I do it without being overcome with sadness? Should I protect my heart? But obviously, keeping the tradition was important to Casey. It was a way to keep her mother part of the Christmas celebration for her family and mine.

Praying for strength to be there for her and keep the memories alive, I baked with Casey that year. Tears and sorrow choked me more than once, but happiness and healing came too.

Out of the ashes of loss, a beautiful new tradition and friendship were born. Casey and I have baked Christmas treats together for more than ten years now, sharing our families and lives with each other. Over time, her husband, children, and father have joined in the festivities along with my husband. Sometimes it is barely controlled chaos, yet it is also wonderful in every way. The kiddos leave sprinkles and frosting

WHEN COOKIES HEAL HEARTS

everywhere in their wild and earnest decorating efforts.

Time with Casey's family fills my heart with new memories and joy. Through our continuing baking tradition, God provided healing. Our families remember Dianne while sharing the holidays filled with love and cookies.

On Christmas morning, I opened a gift from Casey. My heart swelled with love and gratitude at the words on the home-crafted plaque: "It may look like baking, but these are memories in the making."

THE UGLIEST CHRISTMAS TREE *EVER*

Joseph M. Gale Sr.



Usually, we marked a tree in the New Jersey woods early. But in mid-December 1969, we realized we hadn't even begun to look for a Christmas tree. This oversight was understandable, I suppose. It had been a year like no other.

The last item on Dad's long list of projects to complete his dream of operating a marina and fishing boat was the restaurant, which was finally finished and ready to open that spring. Finished or unfinished, the restaurant provided a great location for all the electronic equipment, life preservers, coolers, nets, and fishing rods and reels.

Our home was on the second floor of the same building. We'd lived there four years as, one after the other, the marina and then the restaurant were completed.

In February, a catastrophic fire destroyed it all—our home, our family business, and all our possessions. Then we were notified that all of the equipment from my father's charter fishing boat that had been stored in our home and restaurant was not covered under our homeowner's policy. So, the proceeds of our insurance had to be redirected from rebuilding our home to getting ready for fishing season. But even that would not provide enough. We'd have to sell the marina to fully equip the fishing boat.

The community outreach was overwhelming—we could have filled two

THE UGLIEST CHRISTMAS TREE EVER

homes with the furniture, appliances, and cookware . . . if we'd had a home. We also received more clothes than we'd ever wear. However, we needed yet another miracle.

A wonderful, local lady had a rental house. When her tenants moved out, they left the home in a sad state. She decided she no longer wanted the burden of being a landlord and offered the home to Dad at half its value, interest-free, and not a cent until the end of fishing season. She told Dad, "It's yours, as is."

By spring, what remained of the marina was sold, and the charter fishing boat was ready and equipped for the season. The marina down the road offered to provide the 1969 dockage fees if we prepared their boats' slips and piers and took them down at season's end. Between restoring the new-to-us house, preparing the boat and marina for summer, fishing daily all summer long, and winterizing the boat and marina, it was the busiest and most blessed nine months of our lives.

Then came my youngest sister's question: "Where do you think the Christmas tree would go best in our new house?"

My mother nearly started to cry, but she caught herself. She smiled at her seven-year-old daughter. "Where do *you* think it should go?"

The girl ran back and forth, making several suggestions that were immediately vetoed. Then her smile filled the kitchen as we all agreed with her newest location. OK, Mom and Dad would have to squeeze past it to get into their recently added bedroom.

The next day, we hunted a tree in earnest. Nothing. Finally, at the end of the week, we agreed on one. There was no gentle way to say it. "Mom, that tree is *ugly*." It was misshapen. It had a flat side.

"We can put that side against the wall, and Dad and I can get into our bedroom more easily," she reasoned.

When we carried the tree into the house, we realized two things. First, it was even uglier in the house. Second, on February 28 of that year, twenty years' worth of ornaments, decorations, and lights had been destroyed.

My parents figured we could afford only a few strings of lights. We had made the house payment. My father, out of gratitude, did not want to owe our benefactor any money, so our reserves were spent.

My normally quiet second-oldest sister said, "Did you see all the holly

CHRISTMAS GIFTS

trees this year? They are loaded with berries. We could take some thread and string them for a garland, just like we did at church when we strung popcorn for the birds.”

My older brother commented, “When we were hunting behind the state prison on Old Sawdust Road, I saw a large area of white pine saplings. We could go get some and stand holly and pine branch bouquets in mason jars.”

“With ribbons on them,” my younger brother added.

My mother then said, “We could eat a lot of scrambled eggs for the next few days.” She had to be thinking about the never-ending supply of eggs.

“What for?” my married oldest sister asked.

“I know,” my youngest sister answered. “We’ll blow the eggs out of the shells, then carefully dye them just like it was Easter. Mom showed us how to do that in Girl Scouts.”

We were on a roll. It wasn’t long before we came up with even more ideas. My addition was multicolored paper chains crafted from Sunday’s *Atlantic City Press*. Excited, we proceeded to create replacement ornaments and decorate the ugliest Christmas tree *ever*. Could we make it beautiful?

Finished, the Christmas tree was every kind of eclectic and unique. Did it look like the trees of the past? No. But then on Christmas Eve, we filled the small living room with arms, legs, and bodies. Somebody plugged in the lights. We were excited, waiting for Dad to get home—he was picking up extra cash on a last-minute job driving a semi-truck to Detroit and back. His trip had been extended because of bad weather, but he was on his way. He would be home by morning.

When the lights came on, their light reflected off strings of holly berries and popcorn, paper chains made from the shredded Sunday funnies, Easter eggs, and all the rest. It became apparent to us all that we had received our last miracle—soon, Dad would be home, and we’d all be together. All of us together, with Mom and Dad, was the biggest miracle of all.

It was a miracle because on the day of the fire the previous February, just another school day for the five children still at home, my mother had been painting the dining room. Of course, she was barefoot, wearing paint-speckled jeans and a sweatshirt. That sweatshirt had the colors of every room in the house. Dad had been working out in the marshes, so his outer clothes were by the door with his boots. When he eased into his

THE UGLIEST CHRISTMAS TREE *EVER*

chair, all he wore was thermal-quilted insulated clothing. Dad turned on the brand-new-to-us color TV. He commented to Mom that he still needed to adjust the antenna on the roof later that day to better point it toward Philadelphia.

Mom returned to the small upstairs kitchen to get him a hot drink and saw what she thought might be a thin line of smoke coming up from the floor at the other end of the dining room. They rushed down the stairs and reached for the door into the restaurant's kitchen. My father described what he saw through a window as looking into a blast furnace. The fire marshal gave a different description—it was an oxygen-starved fire. With the smallest supply of oxygen, it would explode.

When my father reached for the door, it would not open. Mom always said it was held shut by an angel. That was the first miracle. Had he turned the knob, the door would have burst open and the rush of oxygen would have turned the home into an incinerator. We children would have instantly been orphaned.

Surrounded by fire, they ran up the only escape—the stairs. Upstairs, the fire looked like dancing fairies all over the floor. My parents rushed into the small bedroom. Mom stuffed sheets under the door. Dad asked her, “Why?” She shrugged. That was another miracle. Otherwise, they never could have gotten out of the window fast enough.

Dad opened the window. The house was one of those coastal homes built up on poles. It would have been a long jump to the frozen ground. Dad decided he would lower Mom and drop her. Suspended out the window, she saw the ladder he had used to install the antenna. It still leaned against the house, awaiting those final adjustments. She hooked it with her leg and tilted it to him. He held it while she climbed down.

When she got to the ground, she moved the bottom of the ladder so it would be steady for him. As he started down, the door breached, and air rushed into the house. Fire exploded out of the open window and shattered numerous other windows.

Dad, out of habit, laid the miracle ladder down. (That charred ladder hung on the side of their garage for the rest of their lives.)

As we prepared for Christmas, Mom added one final touch to the blown eggs—she wrote one of our miracles in wax crayon on each of the many

CHRISTMAS GIFTS

eggs. When they were dyed and hung on the tree, each message of God's provision showed clearly on the pastel-colored eggs. The miracles and blessings were the crowning touch on our ugly Christmas tree: my parents' miraculous survival. Our home. The Lord's provision of a way to safety. The boat had sailed on time, fully equipped. Just to name a few.

The eggs lasted only that one season, but the blessings they documented transformed the ugliest Christmas tree *ever* into the most beautiful.