

The only time my father set fire to a neighbor's roof was on Christmas Eve when I was eight...



Hey, stop putting away the decorations! We are just getting started. This is only the third day of Christmas, there is much more to come. The “to do stuff” is all finished. It is time to breathe the Christmas air with those we love.

And, I have had a very special request from one of you to share again a story which I included in *A WINTER WALK* (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 2006.)* I am told that this is the week in that family when Christmastime stories are shared after dinner. I am honored to provide one for them and for you.

What follows is a condensed version. The only additional thing you need to know is that in some parts of the South it was customary to

shoot off fireworks at Christmas — 74 years ago, when I was eight-years old and living in Picayune, Pearl River County, Mississippi.

SKYROCKET

Times were hard for us, and for the whole area, in the late 1930s. Dad worked at the local lumber mill, and we lived in a rented company house surrounded by other mill families. Like them we bought food at the store owned by the mill. Workers were partially paid in scrip to be used at that store. The bill that many people ran up at the store was often a little more than they had scrip to pay for. There was a trapped feeling among workers in the best of times, and these were depression years with many families suffering from poverty. By common consent, Christmas was a time to put away your fears for the future and enjoy each other. The time I remember best was Christmas Eve in 1939.

At sundown most of our neighbors gathered in their kitchens for a Christmas Eve supper. The McBee family was our nearest neighbor, just beyond our garden and chicken house. They were listening to their new radio. Nelson Eddy's voice could be heard singing whenever their door opened to admit one of their many relatives.

While families around us were sitting down at their tables, Dad collected us in the darkening back yard beside a large tin washtub.

He placed a number of firecrackers under the inverted tub. In the enclosed metallic hollow, any sound would be magnified. Finding a way to make the most of what you had was a talent that all depression-era parents developed. The firecrackers were connected on strips. After a while, Dad got a little carried away. He lit all the remaining strips and threw them under the tub together. The resulting heat caused all the firecrackers to go off at once. The tub shot up into the air, with a deafening explosion. Geese and chickens awoke and squawked in terror. The overall effect was quite pleasing to an eight-year-old.

After many firecrackers, sparklers, and Roman candles, Dad produced his favorite device — a giant skyrocket that one of his fishing partners had made. Always a very cautious person, Dad warned us back a good 10 feet before jamming the wooden shaft deep into the red Mississippi earth. Then he lit the rocket's fuse. We knew something was wrong when Dad motioned us to get even farther away. The rocket was stuck and instead of exploding up in the air would likely blow up right in our backyard. We ran behind the woodpile to watch. The fuse had almost burned up when the rocket slowly rose a few inches off the ground. I can still hear the “hzzzz” and feel the excitement of the impending destruction of the back yard. Suddenly, the rocket climbed to the height of the persimmon tree, picked up speed, turned, and made straight for the McBee's roof.

Nelson Eddy was just swinging into *“O Little Town of Bethlehem”* when the rocket hit the roof. There was a flash of blue, and a

shingle ignited. After a few seconds, the fire activated the rocket and it exploded, sending multicolored stars all over the roof and cascading to the ground. None of the people in the house were aware of this extraordinary sight.

My father went into our house for his big jacket and a bucket. He opened the back yard gate and walked very deliberately over to the Mc Bee house. There was no sense of panic. It was as if he was returning a pail of something borrowed. Above him the flames slowly spread. Dad stepped onto their small porch and knocked on the front door. The radio was loud and they did not hear him. He knocked again. Mr. McBee, a large man who tended to drink a bit too much, appeared and embraced my father. Dad was invited in. We could see him trying to explain but being shoved inside by our jovial neighbor.

For a long moment, all was still. We were motionless, watching the McBee's empty porch and the flames on their roof. Then the front door flew open, and the McBee family poured out, yelling. Mrs. McBee emerged the last, carrying the new radio. Other neighbors, alerted by the clamor, gathered by the side of the house. A ladder was produced. My father filled his bucket at the pump and passed it up the chain of excited friends. Five times the bucket went up and down before the flames were extinguished. Someone brought down what was left of the burned-out rocket, and everyone looked at my father. Soon the air was filled with laughter. Mr. McBee ran in the house for a bottle, which was passed

around. By the time Dad started home, he had become the man of the hour for having provided a unique Christmas Eve.

Christmas was on a Monday that year. On the next Saturday night, Mrs. McBee invited us over to listen to the radio. My mother brought some of her justly famous fruitcake. I had never heard a radio except from a distance. The McBees had never tasted fruitcake. We listened to the war news from Europe. Mrs. McBee asked for the fruitcake recipe.

Then we walked home. I looked up at my father. He had a broad smile. Life for the whole world was about to change, but that was a Christmas I will never forget.

Brother Toby