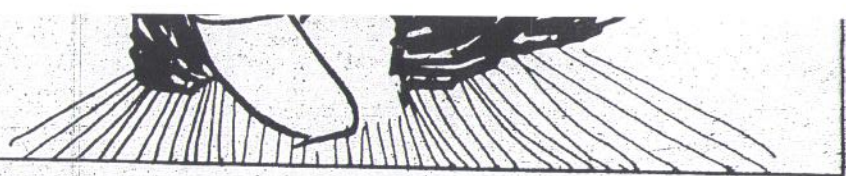




Biff Biffy Mark Hudson, Inc.



Giving of oneself during the holidays

"Daddy wants you to help him carry some things," my wife told me that cold Christmas day in Virginia back in 1983.

A man of a few words, I couldn't say I knew my father-in-law very well then. We silently drove up to the family Southern States store, a place that sold mostly grain and fertilizer but also carried a potpourri of other items people in a farm town need like farm clothes, horse tack, and toys. We headed over to the Nottoway County jail. The jailer immediately led us back to the cells without much conversation. It was almost like he was expecting us.

The best thing I could say about the joint was it was warm. It was crowded with four men to a cell. And filthy. The commodes, in need of Ajax and without lids, were out in the open of the cell. There was no privacy for the most basic of needs. I can't remember seeing the sinks or a shower.

There was no evidence of gifts or Christmas day there. Just a quietness from a depressed group of forgotten men who had their troubles conforming to rules of their society.

We went by individual cells and opened the bags. There was candy. It's doubtful the prison cuisine there was cooked by Aunt Bea. The games he brought would help with the certain boredom since there was no TV

like jails here have. Sports magazines and Mad magazines for those who could read were a good idea, too.

Then there were the New Testaments from the Gideons. This Gideon didn't just stop at the school house.

Tommy spoke to all of the inmates. One he recognized as a star football halfback from a couple of years back. "What are you in for?" he asked.

"Me and a bunch of folks were at this place drinking. I got to fightin' and the police came." He only had a few more days to serve.

The prisoners were black and white, and hardly dangerous if they were in that county jail. How many stories were to be told? Drunken fighting. Writing bad checks. Non-support. Taking somebody else's property. In general they chose not to conform to what society expected of them.

With each group my father-in-law ended with, "You know the real rea-

son for Christmas is to celebrate the birth of Christ. He came to save us from our sins." The Bible could tell them how: Then he ended with a prayer.

That the men listened and were respectful to Tommy when he spoke of Christ's birth, the meaning of Christmas and when he prayed surprised me. The reason these men were in jail was because they didn't respect others property or rights, our laws, or even themselves. So why the civility to this man that any of them knew barely at best?

You can argue they were attentive because of the loneliness and neglect they felt that Christmas day when no one else remembered them. But I think it ran deeper than that.

They saw benevolence from a man who had no family or social reason to offer them kindness. They knew he had nothing to gain for himself.

I don't remember what my wife, Marcia, gave me that Christmas. But I remember what I got four Decembers earlier when we got married. A father-in-law who I could always look up to and revere.

Randy Daniel is a weekly columnist for The Herald. He is a dentist in Stockbridge. He and his family reside in northeastern Henry County.

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