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Christmas Eve in the Manger of the Little Barn

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Christmas Eve in the

On Christmas Eve 1938, my family had just finished eating supper on Bernan Hill in Van Camp. It's located about three miles south of New Martinsville in Wetzel County. Grandma Euna Van Camp Long, matriarch of

the hill, scrubbed her favorite feed-sack tablecloth, which had been soiled by a blackberry spill—caused by a careless person who shall remain nameless at this point. To avoid Grandma

Eunie's mounting displeasure, my father lit his lantern and went to care for his sheep in the Big Barn on the ridge.

Thanks to his West Virginia ingenuity, my dad had installed

Our author, Jack Furbee, with his father, Clyde, at Van Camp, Wetzel County, ca. 1936.



Manger of the Little Barn

By Jack Furbee

a wind charger and batteries, allowing us to listen to radio stations WWVA in Wheeling and WMMN in Fairmont, among others. To offset the tense atmosphere, Grandpa

Ferd rocked briskly while listening to the radio comedy *Lum and Abner*.

Relying on the glow from an oil lamp, Mother sheltered me from Grandma's wrath by making the story of the first Christmas come alive. Even as I listened intently, I was planning my escape from a possible scolding. The story of Jesus' birth in a manger gave me an idea: maybe I should sleep in a stable on Christmas Eve?

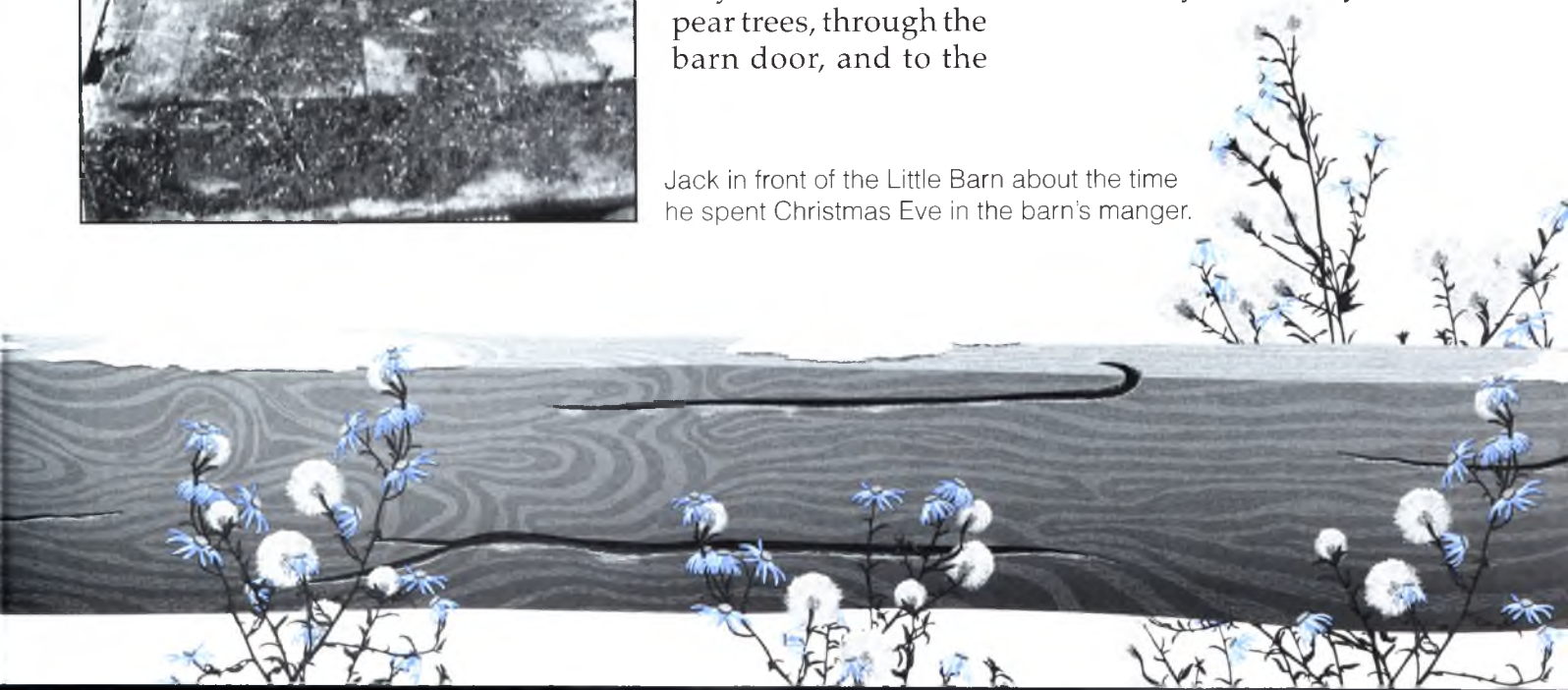
Although I often visited the milk cows and their calves in the Little Barn, this nocturnal visit surprised everyone. With a blanket and pillow in hand, I exited the back door and side gate. Snow and moonlight lit my way under the frosted pear trees, through the barn door, and to the

manger, located in the center of a stone-walled basement where the cows rested. My bovine friends, having been milked for the night, must have been taken aback to see me show up after dark. They arose from their winter's nap to see me prepare the manger for bed. Having no fear of the cows, I spread my blanket, fixed my pillow, and took my place beside my barnyard friends. The cows soon resumed their own sleep. The barn was completely still, except for the sounds of the cows belching their cuds and chewing multiple times in anticipation of the morning milking. Grandma's displeasure was the farthest thing from my thoughts.

Wondering what I was doing, Mother fled Grandma's diminishing displeasure and followed me to the Little Barn to find her child curled up comfortably on the hay in the



Jack in front of the Little Barn about the time he spent Christmas Eve in the barn's manger.



manger. My gentle mother paused for a while, took in the unusual scene, looked at me admiringly, and brought me back to my regular bed in the house. On our way to the attic bedroom, we noticed that Grandma's concerns for her tablecloth had dissipated, replaced by her desire to know where her grandson had been.

Dad returned from his expectant ewes, Grandpa unwound after laughing at Lum and Abner's antics, and Mom rested beside Dad in our crowded bedroom. In the silence of that well-worn Appalachian bungalow, Grandma couldn't relax until she had found out from Mother exactly where I'd been.

"Gertie, where was Jackie?" she inquired, sitting up in bed and projecting her voice toward the attic steps.

Choosing quickly and appropriately from a repertoire of possible answers, Mother simply replied, "I'll tell you tomorrow, Mama. Go to sleep."

By the time Christmas morning had arrived, Grandma had seemingly forgotten all about her tablecloth and my

mysterious disappearance the night before. Perhaps this is why all Christmas Eves seem anticlimactic to me. Not even



Jack with his mother, Gertrude, and grandparents Euna Van Camp Long and Ferd Long, ca. 1938.

the majesty of a *Messiah* performance or a Midnight Mass can come close to spending Christmas Eve in a manger. How better to start learning about the life of Jesus than in a manger surrounded by the sweet smell of hay and the moist breath of my animal friends? Maybe the adoring look on my dear mother's face was akin

to Mary's gaze as she looked down lovingly at her babe on that first Christmas.

A wonderful lifetime of Christmases have come and gone, but every Christmas Eve brings back memories of a remote mountain barn dug out of a West Virginia hillside. A wilderness of vines, tangled by decades of undisturbed

growth, now covers a crumbling stone wall. This jungle-like setting preserves the site of the manger where I got to experience the simple story of Jesus' birth. Today, as I listen to children sing carols and play bells, my mind drifts back to that unforgettable Christmas Eve and my manger, where Mother found me and returned me to my bed. ❁

JACK FURBEE was born in Wetzel County in 1934. He holds a doctorate in education from West Virginia University; served 35 years as an educator, counselor, and administrator; and is professor emeritus at Olivet Nazarene University in Bourbonnais, Illinois. His autobiography is titled *Growing Up Appalachian in the Van Camp Community of Wetzel County, West Virginia*. Jack's most recent contribution to GOLDENSEAL appeared in our Summer 2015 issue.



Jack with a homemade sled at the family farm, ca. 1938.

