

## Tom Marshall's Weekly News, December 24, 2018

**A Shallcross Christmas Dinner:** In the 1920s through the 1940s, we always got together with my mother's family, the Shallcrosses, on Christmas day. Dinner was always at 1:00 P.M., between 12 and 20 family members and close friends would be in attendance, and it would take place at one of three places: the Fergusons' at Ridley Park, Grandmother's at Middletown, or at Auburn Heights. When female Shallcrosses met upon arrival, they would greet each other with "Christmas Gift, Christmas Gift!" I have learned recently that that was a 19th-century way of saying "Merry Christmas."

My ability to relate what went into preparation of Christmas dinner is very limited. My culinary skills are few; when I was young, I could fry or scramble eggs, toast bread, squeeze fresh orange juice, and churn homemade ice cream. Anything beyond that was beyond me (and still is). Despite this serious flaw in my abilities, here is what I think went on for the hostess in charge that respective year, namely my grandmother (assisted by Aunt Helen Shallcross), my Aunt Mary Ferguson, and my mother.

Until the late 1930s when Birdseye peas became popular, there were no frozen foods for domestic households. After 1934, Auburn Heights had an electrified kitchen, but Aunt Mary and grandmother never did. All three hostesses had a cook to assist them (until World War II dried up this market). The fresh-killed and dressed turkey was roasted in a woodstove with the fire surrounding the oven and heating the cooktop locations above. The bird, usually between 15 and 25 pounds, was stuffed with stale bread chopped into small blocks to provide the popular filling. The bird usually went in the oven about 7:00 A.M. to be ready for the table at 1:00. It had been basted, stuffed, and placed in the large roasting pan the night before. It was carved and served at the table by the man of the house, and all of them were good at it. My father would make sure his knife was sharp at least a day ahead of time. The legs and wings would be cut away, one side at a time, to allow for free carving of the breast. A stack of dinner plates would be in front of the carver. After the meat and filling was on a plate, it was passed to the opposite end of the long table to the hostess, for addition of the several vegetables, then back to the consumer. By the time everyone had been served (and many had eaten), it was time for the carver to ask how many wanted seconds.

Vegetables would include mashed potatoes, candied sweet potatoes, creamed mushrooms, and two or three that had been "put up" ("canned" in air-tight Mason jars) from the previous summer's bounty. Raw celery and olives would be passed around, along with cranberry jelly made in a mold (my mother had a mold that looked like a fish).

I don't remember much about soup or salads. I don't think we ever had soup, and there was probably a small gelatin salad. Hot rolls were always a part of dinner. Aunt Mary prided herself on her white potato rolls. Pumpkin pie was the favored dessert, served with a small dab of whipped cream. There was always one mince pie, a favorite of Uncle Bassett Ferguson and myself. Cream mints from the Kennett Kandy Kitchen and homemade ginger candy rounded out the meal.

One year at Auburn Heights, about 1935, as the guests moved to the large living room to chat and exchange gifts, Gene Ferguson, then nearly 20, was not in the group. Very quiet all his life, he didn't enjoy small talk anyway. About 1½ hours later, when my mother went to the kitchen, all the dishes were washed and dried and neatly stacked on the drain board. Automatic dishwashers and driers didn't come to domestic kitchens until many years later.

Then it was time for leftovers. Most guests were still around when everyone sat down at the table about 7:30 to enjoy cold turkey, pie, and whatever else was offered. The visitors then left for home. I had a wonderful childhood.

In 2018, HAPPY HOLIDAYS to all, and to all a "Good Night."