

## Tom Marshall's Weekly News, December 26, 2006

**Christmas 1933 at Grandmother Shallcross's Home:** When we were driving home from Clayton, Delaware, last night, after a sumptuous dinner at Ruth's brother Phil's home, it reminded me of the times my parents and I had driven home from my grandmother's home in Middletown on Christmas nights in the 1930s. Flowerdale on North Broad Street was a favorite place to go on Christmas Day, second only to the times the greater Shallcross family came here on December 25. The year 1933 stands out particularly in my memory; perhaps it was easy for a special event to make an impression on a nine-year-old.

December 25, 1933, was warm and sunny in Delaware. When we arrived at grandmother's home about mid-day, her greater family was assembling in her sun porch. The sun was streaming in from this southern exposure, and it was very pleasant while awaiting the call to dinner. Aunt Helen and Uncle Gene Shallcross, both single and living with their mother, always had a toy or a short game to entertain a nine-year-old. I enjoyed my first cousins, the Ferguson boys, as Bassett Jr., called "Jimty" was 22, and Gene was 17. Associating with them made me feel grown up. My dad always enjoyed conversation with their father, Bassett, who had married my mother's eldest sister in 1906. The women, including my mother and Aunt Mary Ferguson, were busy in the kitchen, and grandmother, age 81 at the time, was supervising the overall operation.

We were called to dinner at the elongated table set up in the dining room. Grandmother was at one end in a bay window of the room, and Uncle Ned, who was to carve the turkey at the table, was at the other end with his back against the outside door. In between were the Fergusons, the Marshalls, Gertrude Whittock (a cousin of grandmother's, whom we all called "Cousin Gertie"), Aunt Helen, and Uncle Gene with his special friends Mabel Allen and her daughter, and possibly one or two more guests. I never saw such a variety of food, some of it seemingly for the first time, and I enjoyed sampling all of it. Finally, two or three kinds of pie were offered for dessert and probably mints, nuts, and other candies. Not long after leaving the table, I had a terrible stomach ache, but fortunately it was short-lived, and everything was fine again.

Grandmother's three daughters insisted she should rest for an hour or so, and she obliged. Uncle Gene took his namesake, Gene Ferguson, on a short tour of some of the farms. My father, Uncle Bassett and "Jimty" were engaged in a conversation about the future, and the latter commented that when we assembled for Christmas 1938, we might know the answers. When darkness came, Aunt Mary and my mother thought their mother and Cousin Gertie would enjoy seeing some of the lighted trees around Middletown, and since both my father and Uncle Bassett had seven-passenger Packard sedans (ours was a '32, and the Ferguson's a '29) on the scene, there would be plenty of seating for all who wanted to go. A few but certainly not all homes had electrically lighted trees in their front yards, and this was a marvel to someone born in 1852, as was my grandmother (Cousin Gertie in 1856). The trees would not have more than three dozen lights, and they were always multi-colored.

About 7:30, it was time to have leftovers, so those who were still there sat around the table again. I have always liked leftovers. Middletown, like many small communities, had an annual dance on Christmas night (Kennett Square's was mentioned last week). Uncle Bassett joked that he was going to the dance if he could find a date—the Ferguson boys did not seem to have an interest in it. When we finally left about 9:30 for the drive home, he was still talking about going to the dance, but I doubt that he did. When passengers got in a car on a winter evening, it was cold, but lap robes and Tropic Aire heaters installed in many Packards of that period helped and the ride soon became comfortable. It took 45 minutes from Middletown to Yorklyn—sometimes we went through Cooch's Bridge and Newark and sometimes through Kirkwood, Bear Station, "Christine" and Stanton.