

Christmas on the Back Roads of my Mind

By Maurice Carter in The Covington News – December 9, 2012

Traveling around town by car, bike, or on foot, I pass through the Covington Square anytime I can. But, especially at Christmas time, I can't resist the lure of our downtown.

Sure, it's beautiful, and there are businesses there that deserve and have earned my support. But, something more draws me in this time of year – especially at night. It's something that goes back to my childhood some 50 years ago. And, it's a feeling that touches me deep inside in places words can never fully explain.

I wasn't born in Covington or Newton County. In fact, until I met Kim and we started dating in college, I'd never been on I-20 beyond the Perimeter. Yet, our town evokes for me special childhood memories of places far from here and times long since passed.

It's the mid to late 60s, and I'm with my younger brother and sister in the back of either a circa 1962 Ford Starliner, a '65 Falcon station wagon, or even crammed into the back of '67 Mustang – depending on the year. Being the oldest, I get the backseat of the Mustang, while the other two curl into floor board cubby holes behind the front seats. How we fit, I'll never know. There were no child seats in those days. Then again, there was no room to be flung about even if we did have a wreck.

Darkness obliterates the world outside the car, as Mom and Dad have us traveling at night in hopes our sleep will subdue the incessant asks of "are we there yet?" It works on the other two, but not on me. From birth, I was afraid I might miss something if I ever closed my eyes. I never slept in the car.

We're on the two-lane back roads of southeast Georgia, on a Christmas journey to my father's home town of Baxley, where our grandparents await. It's a stretch of road known mostly today as the Golden Isles Parkway, but back then it was just plain ol' US Highway 23 and Georgia Highway 27. Even as a young boy, I knew the route and the sequence of towns by heart, and could rattle them off as easily as the names of Santa's reindeer... There's Macon and Cochran, then Eastman and McRae. Further along came Lumber City, with its stinky paper mills, then Hazelhurst, and finally Baxley.

In summer, those 200+ miles were an eternity to a child's restless mind. Riding sometimes with my grandfather, I would ask impatiently "when are we gonna get there?" Each time, he gave his usual unsatisfying response: "We'll get there directly."

But, the Christmas journey was different. The dark of night that seemed so empty and lifeless was punctuated every 20 miles or so by the sudden burst of holiday lights which decorated each small town along the way. I remember so vividly lying in the Falcon wagon, head back, eyes peering up into the darkness, watching those twinkling stars,

candy canes, and strings of colored lights as our car passed beneath them in the silent night.

Well, most years it was silent. There was that trip when the Starliner backfired all the way to Baxley! No telling how many poor souls were ducking and covering as we rolled through that night.

Baxley is a distant echo to me now, as are my grandparents. Within a dozen years of my earliest memories, they moved to Atlanta; Alzheimer's had already stolen from us most of the grandmother we loved. Shortly after she left us, Parkinson's disease would lay claim to my grandfather as well. Their bodies lingered here physically for some years, but their spirits died and are buried somewhere back in the Baxley of my youth.

I feel it every year on the first night I come upon Covington's bright and festive Square at Christmas time. In that moment, I'm six years old again, riding in the back seat through the dark night, eyes open wide, gazing ahead with eager anticipation as the next town's holiday lights glow into sight at the point where dark road meets the sky ahead.

Perhaps my father's death this year was yet another frayed, thin thread to that long distant past giving in to passing time. But, when I drive through our Square at night, those lost moments come back as close and real as ever. Something precious is kept safe and brought near again.

If you've ever wondered how a "newcomer" like me can love this town. That's how.