The Christmas Party

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Open the door to the stately brick house on the far end of High Street on any particular day and you will be greeted with the utmost hospitality and be asked to sit for a visit. Open the door on Christmas Eve, however, and you will be welcomed into illuminated chambers of Christmas cheer that have been part of the heartbeat of Murfreesboro for thirty-five years. Cars line the street. Candles cast a glow on wreaths in every window. The sound of escalating merriment beckons you up the brick walk, particularly since the side porch holds what I’ve always considered the “young folks” bar. And then, upon stepping into the entrance hall, there stands the dignified hostess. If you are traveling through this door with me, you envision her in a matronly evening gown with beautiful silver hair, ambling more slowly than she used to, but still with plenty of strength for a powerful embrace, even at 93 years old. Her smile radiates excitement to see her family and friends all gathered, and that smile—creating apple round cheeks and a cheery gathering around the eyes—has certainly not changed through the years. That smile graces the countenance of Nancy Copeland—wife of the late Judge Copeland, devoted member of the Methodist Church, best friend to my grandmother Margaret Revelle, and hostess of Murfreesboro’s largest and longest running Christmas party.

For those like me who have left Murfreesboro for school, jobs, or other opportunities in the adult world—coming home only for cherished holiday visits—the party is even more of an affair. There are quite a few locally bred folks who are now bringing their own families back to repeat the cycle, with the “little ones” of the third generation giving Mrs. Copeland particular joy. I value such institutions of home life, and have increasingly been considering how they come to stand in that light. We each have those certain traditions that beckon us homeward and fill our hearts, either through another year’s fulfillment or at least through the memory of past years. I had a nice chat with Mrs. Copeland recently, and was pleased to tell her she has created that tradition for me.

First, I must say that I myself am very much a product of Murfreesboro (my dad’s family having been here for generations, and my mom’s arriving in the late 1960s for Poppa to take over as the Baptist minister), and cannot imagine Christmas without Mrs. Copeland’s party. The party I know completely fills the downstairs of her large home for several hours Christmas Eve. The spread in the dining room is plenty for a good supper—think shrimp cocktail, oysters, chicken legs, chicken salad, ham rolls, and sweets—and not only the side porch, as mentioned before, but also the back study boasts a well-stocked bar. Everyone dresses nicely, the women in classy holiday outfits and most of the men in suits (but perhaps accented by a funny Christmas tie). My family has a tradition of opening one present on Christmas Eve, and if there is a fancy article of clothing awaiting, it often gets nudged towards the recipient so that it can be put to immediate use. I tell Mrs. Copeland that the invitation is part of the custom in my mind. Not that we need an invitation to know that is what we will be doing Christmas Eve, but my family looks expectantly amongst the pile of Christmas cards for an originally crafted Copeland Christmas poem, and we chuckle at the charm her sharp wit produces year after year. She chuckles as well, glad to hear that we appreciate “those silly little first grade verses.”
So is this party that I envision the appropriate conception for years past? Mrs. Copeland resonates good taste and innate hostess characteristics—she did, after all, entertain for the leaders of the state as her husband worked his way to the North Carolina Supreme Court. I would not be surprised if her Christmas party had been fanciful from the outset, but it turns out there has been quite an evolution in size and scale. There are only a few families who may remember this, but the Copeland Christmas party actually stemmed from rather humble beginnings.

“We called it the ‘nothing room,’” she said, describing the upstairs playroom with games and a ping-pong table. “It was upstairs, but it wasn’t a bedroom, so it was the nothing room. That’s where we could send the kids to tend to themselves, and they were perfectly content up there.” As it turns out, the foundation of the Copeland Christmas Party was merely a small group gathering, where the kids ran upstairs to play and the grown-ups visited for a while after the candlelight service at church. “Oh, it was a small affair,” she describes it. “Just probably thirty or so came over after church for a little fruitcake and Methodist punch.” Methodist punch being, of course, non-alcoholic.

In the early days she would see people on the street, or the beauty parlor, or Bynum Brown’s Thanksgiving brunch—another tradition for another time—and tell them to “come on by” after church on Christmas Eve. Knowing Mrs. Copeland’s presence around town, and her respected capabilities of small talk, it is no wonder the party grew. “It used to drive William crazy!” she says, referring to her “on the street” invitation system. Nevertheless, it worked for quite a while, until every now and then someone would get overlooked, and she would get into trouble. The solution for the past ten or so years, therefore, has been a mailed invitation, which she currently sends to 90 families, but requires no response. She also makes clear that anyone visiting for Christmas should certainly come along, which means, she says, “We sometimes have no idea who an entire family is until we ask and make the connections.”

Year after year families stride up the brick walk, give the hostess yet another of the hugs she loves, and disperse throughout the downstairs. Some go straight to the food, some are immediately pulled into conversation, and some may want to marvel at the live ten foot Christmas tree that comes fresh from the North Carolina mountains. The overall theme of the tree fits in with other decorations around the house, but also on display are special ornaments that the family has collected through the years. Mrs. Copeland loves to point to the miniature dolls that are keepsakes from every country she and Judge Copeland have visited. Meanwhile the children are free to immediately scamper off to play, so you might watch out for a toddler taking a shortcut under the dining room table to cut a friend off from escape. Eventually they will end up lining the staircase, worn out and buried in their plates of food—a sight Mrs. Copeland enjoys maybe above all others. She acknowledges that phase when kids probably don’t want to come, but notes wisely that when they see their friends, the realize it’s “not the worst thing in the world!” And yes, young and old seem to enjoy themselves, whether sitting in the living room with the old “Methodist punch” or gathering on the porch with the young adults home for the holidays. Some stay longer than others, but everyone heads home full of contentment for the good food, fellowship, and, I think, the small town of which they are a part.

The party graciously accommodates a drop-in atmosphere that accommodates all the guests. It was curious to me, then, that Mrs. Copeland could give me very accurate numbers for each year: “We’ve had upwards of 155, but I’m trying to cut back a little, you know, so now we average 118.” While I usually see her in the front entrance to greet her guests, I knew she could not possibly be
keeping track of every guest in all her excitement. Her secret, she said, is a family review party. The family members all sit down after Christmas first to bet on the number of attendees, and then to collectively decide whom all they saw at the party, while Mrs. Copeland diligently marks them on her list of past attendees. There are enough kids, spouses, and grandkids that I’m sure this is an effective survey method, as well as a memorable family time. Not only do they track attendance, but have a chance to share the news and stories of another year.

The one aspect Mrs. Copeland seems at all dissatisfied with is…church relations. Since her affair takes place after church, the timing for Candlelight Christmas services can be an issue. Hopefully we at least coordinate to have the same starting time, but even then the length ultimately varies. It seems that the Methodist preacher can be a bit long-winded. If he “keeps on praying and all,” it leaves room for the Baptist congregants to go on over to the Mrs. Copeland’s before she even leaves her own service. She tells them to of course go on in, but there is a slight indignation in her voice when she relates how the Baptists often “take charge” of her own party. Things have of course never gotten out of hand, and this has become more of a town joke than anything, but I suspect she really would just like the chance to greet everyone who walks in her door. Also, she may be sticking up for the Methodists who feel short-shifted on their share of oysters. Oh well, all in the spirit of Christmas, right?

After we have reminisced together about the party and the people of our town, Mrs. Copeland fondly tells me that it is seeing everyone—some friends she may not otherwise see much throughout the year and some she sees every day—that is by far her favorite part. I think Murfreesboro would agree. She provides the big brick house with illuminated chambers of Christmas cheer, and we together make a party and a town institution.

I would like to thank my English 117 class for giving me the grand encouragement to move forward with this piece. I am happy to have given you a glimpse of small town southern life through my work. My writing group—Lawson, Carol, Janet, and Brea—along with Professor Harris provided excellent guidance along the way. I must also thank my family for their insights on the party, and more generally the respect they furnished in me for the history and traditions of my community. Finally, a very special thanks goes to the hostess herself, Mrs. Nancy Copeland. Murfreesboro, and Christmas, would not be the same without you.