

## **Christmas on the Farm**

*By Gene Hall*

It's always a mistake to paint a mythological picture of farm life. The Norman Rockwell image never really existed. However, there are not pieces of my childhood on the farm that my children never experienced, nor will my three-month-old granddaughter. Christmas is one of those times.

My Christmas memories are of the farm because that's where I grew up. Our 235 acres were nestled in among walls of tall pines in deep East Texas. We raised cattle and hay and for a time tried both the dairy and the hog business. Christmas was never an extravagant affair, but Mom and Dad always managed to make it special.

The locating and harvesting of our Christmas tree is the memory that really sticks with me. Finding trees is never a problem in the Piney Woods of East Texas. In addition to Loblolly, Longleaf and Slash pines, there is a lot of cedar. This is the tree that our family tradition demands. Though I have not lived in Newton County, Texas, for more than 30 years, and have only rarely participated in securing a wild tree since moving away, I remember it with a rush of nostalgia.

Scouting for the perfect tree was the first step. My brother and I would saddle up our horses, Smokey and Dan, and look for cedars close enough to approach with a wheeled vehicle. When we reported back to Mom, a date would be set. Sometimes invitations for this task would go out to cousins and friends, but usually it was my brother, four sisters, my parents and one or both of my grandparents, who lived on the farm with us.

Dad or Paw would drive the tractor. Later on, my brother or I would inherit this coveted position. We would pull a trailer, with hay bales for seating, into the woods and check out some of the best cedars our pasture had to offer.

Today, I shudder to think what federal safety inspectors would think of our enterprise. The first tree we came upon, I seem to remember, was never good enough, though we sometimes came back to it. When the selection was finally made, we'd saw it down and head home.

A decorating party would follow, complete with popcorn, hot chocolate and much laughter. Finally, we'd wait for my father to announce every year, without fail, "I think this is the best one we've ever had." Somehow, it always was.

I have other Christmas memories. I remember how hard it was to ride my new bicycle on dirt roads, thinking that my cousins in town had a much easier time of it. I remember some Decembers when cattle prices were low. Even so, one thing we could always count on was that there was always going to be something for everyone under that little gussied-up cedar tree.