

Christmas at Dot and Dr. Garlan Gudger's old house

Story and photos by David Moore

Dot Gudger's mother didn't have a green thumb. It was red and green. Nothing specific she did, no particular family tradition, she simply possessed a spark that made Christmas joyously special to a young child. Dot, in turn, developed her own green and red thumb, much to the joy of her children and now her grandchildren, too.

So Christmas at the Gudgers' 133-year-old house on Third Avenue in Cullman has been something of a spectacle ever since Dot and Dr. Garlan Sr. and their children, Jill, Joy and Garlan Jr. moved there in 1980.

Actually, her ability to spark special Christmases got started before that. Early in their marriage the Gudgers drove a family holiday circuit between Cullman, Tennessee and North Carolina. Once while traveling the car broke down and they spent Christmas Eve in a motel room with a scrawny, spur of the moment Charlie Brown tree. Even there, Dot ensured that Santa delivered presents to 5-year-old Jill. "Our first Christmas in this big



house I really wanted to decorate," Dot says. "I put up five trees, all of them live. I didn't do that again."

Maybe not, but for years her extensive decorating required an October jump-start.

Dot and Garlan Sr. retired from college jobs in 1996. Now she doesn't start until the end of November.

"But I have help, now. I just can't do it all," Dot says.

Little wonder. The Gudgers have accumulated so many decorations they're kept in a storage unit. The magnitude of the project comes to light if you ever see the mountain of decorations piled on their living room floor in early December.

She still puts up four trees, though three are not live, and the "kids" pitch in. A big help is Kerry Walker of Pine Hill Tree Farm in Tarrant, from whom Dot orders her nine-foot live concolor, or white, fir for the living room. It's delivered the day after Thanksgiving and comes flocked with artificial snow and pre-strung lights.

Dot Gudger had been happy in the "perfect" three-bedroom brick house on Lake Hill Street she and Garlan Sr. had moved into the year after they married. While she taught business classes at Beville State Community College in Sumiton, Dr. Gudger drove to Wallace State Community College where he was dean of students. Daily he passed the old house on Third Avenue, fell in love with it and convinced Dot to move there.



The Christmas Eve table is set with the good china, crystal and silver. Sutton Fuller built the house in 1881. Subsequent inhabitants include Adam Dreher, founder of Dreher Furniture Factory, and Elsa and Earney Bland. In 1980, Elsa, a niece of Col. John Cullmann, and her nephew, Stanley Johnson, sold the house to the Gudgers. They've changed it little but did build a breakfast room onto the kitchen, glassed in a side porch, converted the attic to a fifth bedroom for Garlan Jr. and added leaded glass, gingerbread and a front door procured through the family business, Southern Accents. The house also has a living room, dining room, entrance hall, library, former servant's room and a catch-all room.



In the living room, a large antique Bible, above center, is turned to the Christmas story in Luke. Also large in the living room is the live, 9-foot, flocked fir tree. A few times before Dot started ordering from her current supplier, Gudger Christmas trees toppled over. There are holes in the floor where an errant tree was once nailed down. Many of the decorations are antiques or echo Victorian times, left. Three smaller trees elsewhere are not live. One of those, the Bearcat tree, stands year round in the glassed-in porch with decorations that recognize activities and achievements of the Gudger grandchildren. Another faux tree sports a Scottish theme as a nod to their Gudger roots and includes the clan tartan.



"They bring it in and set it up," she says. Burns Florist in Hanceville bedecks the outside of the house with classic greenery and red ribbons. Michael's Flowers and Design ensures four of the five fireplaces are not just warm but festive. She calls owner Michael Richard "a pure genius."

"I can manage the rest," Dot grins. One tradition important to Dot is displaying a large, antique Bible that Garlan Sr. bought. It's opened to the Christmas story. And the family traditionally attends the annual Carols by Candlelight program at First Baptist Church.

"That is what Christmas is all about," Dot says. Another tradition, the origin and reason for which no one is sure, is that Joy and Garlan Sr. always lower an antique oil lamp in the hallway and light it.

Stocking for grandchildren are hung by the living room fireplace, upper left. In the breakfast room, a kitchen tree is decorated with old utensils and toys, upper right, and crystal, candles and nativity berries adorn an antique cabinet.



The Gudger family got together for a Good Life Magazine Christmas photo in 2013. Grouped by families from left to right, are Pierce and Garlan "Tripp" Edward III, sons of Heather and Garlan Gudger Jr.; Dr. Garlan and Dot Gudger; Mary Elizabeth, Sarah Katherine, Alexandria in the scarf and Victoria, daughters of Joy and Brady Barker; and Jill and Mike Howell.

Some aspects of Christmas have evolved over time. One is Dot's acceptance of her children and spouses bringing food.

"I'm not a big fan of cooking anyway," she confesses.

On Christmas Eve, Jill, Joy and Garlan, their spouses and six children arrive for dinner and presents.

The menu has become something of a tradition: pork loin roast with cherry sauce, green bean casserole, sweet potato casserole, cranberry salad and son-in-law Mike Howell's mashed potatoes and deviled eggs.

"That's the basic menu, and then we add things," Dot says. "Maybe a turkey breast or ham. There are 14 of us, and these guys can eat."

When the Gudger children were small, they slept together upstairs on Christmas Eve. They could not come down and tear into their separate piles of presents until Garlan Sr. and Dot had gotten up and gone into the living room to check if Santa had, indeed, visited during the night.

The suspense and excitement, at least for the girls, was escalated by the wait – and further frustrated by Garlan Jr. The girls complained that he was impossible to wake up.

Nowadays, after digging into Christmas Eve dinner, the crew moves into the living room and digs into family presents. Grownups take their customary seats while the kids dole out gifts. It takes a while.

"I love buying presents," Dot says. "I buy them all year. I don't care about getting any presents. I love to give people stuff!"

Christmas Day is spent visiting their children and their families to see what Santa rained down around their trees. That works well with in-law schedules, Dot says. Afterward, it's back to the Gudgers for leftovers as the spectacle winds down.

"All of them are really the same, but every Christmas is still special," Dot says. "I think it's the anticipation."

That, and maybe having a red and green thumb, which obviously kept alive much of the excitement she felt as a child at Christmas.

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