

"Christmas Gift!" (2008)

Houston Hodges, for Writer's Corner on WLRH, Huntsville, AL USA

That was the traditional greeting on Christmas morning in my family. It had come from my mother and her Missouri roots, though I've heard later it appeared in a lot of Southern settings: "Christmas Gift!" was what you said when you saw someone else for the first time on Christmas morning... and the rules stated that then the other person had to give you a Christmas gift. No matter that it was your own grandmother who said it to you first, and that you had already planned to give her a box of candy (again), the obligation was clear. It was also pretty dumb, but that doesn't matter with traditions. It's fun to imagine that cry marking the end of snowy visits by horsedrawn sleigh a hundred years ago, when you finally got to the neighbor's house and surprised them when they opened the door: "Christmas Gift!"

The custom has continued until today in my family, 75 years after I first was taught it at my mother's knee. At first it was really easy to get my children, and then my grandchildren, when I phoned them on Christmas. When some unsuspecting person answered the phone, as soon as they said, "Hello!" you could get them: "Christmas gift!" The introduction of those "Caller ID" systems has made it riskier: frequently these days a grandkid will beat you to the punch and answer the phone with the magic phrase, even while they're giggling: "Christmas gift, Grandpop!" Uppity youngsters, with no respect for their elders.

I've no idea how this custom started, or where Ñ or how old it is Ñ or whether it appears outside of the southern United States. Its totally lunatic rationale makes it all the more charming: of course they're going to give you a Christmas gift; it's your very own family member you're greeting! But no matter: some customs are worth retaining for the family glue they provide, the bonding that's called "love."

On the whole I'm glad that "Christmas gift!" still works in my family. There was another tried-and-true Yuletide custom in my mother's family that has NOT continued, thank goodness: that was the requirement that for Christmas breakfast the main course was... pigs' feet in batter.

Anyone for "Christmas gift?"

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Houston Hodges describes himself as a "mostly retired Presbyterian minister," though he still preaches from time to time at the Big Cove Presbyterian Church out near Hampton Cove.