

Guthrie, Madge: One Clear Beautiful Night ^[1]

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Madge Guthrie: One Clear Beautiful Night

by David Cecelski. "[Listening to History](#) ^[2]," *News & Observer*. Published 12/10/2000. Copyrighted. Reprinted with permission.

At her home on Harkers Island, Madge Guthrie told me about Christmas when she was a child during the Great Depression. Renowned for its fishing and boatbuilding traditions, Harkers Island is east of Beaufort, in the marshy stretch of coastal villages that people in Carteret County call "Downeast." The island was a world unto itself in Guthrie's youth, before the bridge to the mainland was built, and times were hard. Christmas -- and maybe most of a Harkers Island childhood-- was a time of simple joys.

A "dingbatter" is, well, let's say a term of endearment for those not lucky enough to have grown up Down East.

In Madge Guthrie's words:



Madge Guthrie. Photo by Chris Seward, 2000. To request permission for further use or to purchase a print, please contact the News & Observer.

I remember when the biggest joy of Christmas for me was getting to ride the mail boat over to Beaufort and just look at the five and dime and the drugstore. We'd go down on the shore, bundled up, head and ears, and the mail boat came from when you got there, all the stores on Front Street had docks built out from them, because everything came ... by boat. I remember how pretty the store windows were. They put cedar around them, and candles in the window, and they'd write. As a child, of course I wished for things, but I knew I couldn't have them. I'd go and look and be starry-eyed, but I was satisfied with seeing it and dreaming about it. Oh, I thumbed the catalogs! Every page in the Sears & Roebuck Wish Book. At Christmas Eve service, the church elders gave every child a little toy, if only a homemade doll. They were some children's only gift.

The next day, on Christmas, you had dinner right at 12 o'clock. We had a huge table, to seat 10 people, but we children thought sitting around a fish box, eating, was the biggest thing. They'd take a fish box, set it out on the floor, and throw it. The rest of the day, the old folks rested, and we just ran the neighborhood. We ran the shores. By the time we were big enough to walk, we ran in the woods together. Nobody worried about anyone. Didn't have to.

My daddy was a dingbatter -- he'd get seasick from putting his feet in a pan of water -- but 99 percent of what was on here was making their living from the water. Nothing, no fish or shrimp, would be here in winter, and they would go down to. That afternoon, the men would gather at one of the stores, around a potbelly stove, and talk about everything and everybody. They'd sit around that stove with their feet propped up, visiting and chewing tobacco and all that. Usually they'd have

I wondered if the Great Depression dampened children's Christmas spirits.

We were all in the same boat, more or less, and we didn't expect any better than what we had. If we had a nice warm place to lay down at night, and we had food on the table, we were content. There was nobody around here jumping out the. I think the fishermen fared better than others. They always had stuff to eat, and they had stuff to barter with. They'd take a barrel of fish into town and swap it off for flour. I remember my grandfather carried a barrel of fish to town and paid the. We were by ourselves for so long, and most everybody was self-sufficient. Everybody was "I am what I am, and if you don't like it, you look out for yourself and I'll look out for me." They didn't ask no quarters nor give none. It's that fierce independence. Most everybody had hard times, at times. People looked out for each other. I remember a family that lived near us. It was always hard times for them, because the father was a drunk. They call alcoholics sick now, but he was a drunk. Mother. Mother come home, pulled the sheets off the bed, washed them, and before night had them back to that house. She had taken pillowcases, cut them like baby clothes, did some sewing, and she had four little dresses for that baby before the

She looked through her window at the stars out in the dark.

I remember one clear, beautiful night just before Christmas, mother and myself had been cross the hill over there, and we were coming back. It wasn't moonlight, but it was real clear, bright night. The evening star was so bright, and we were. I said, "Mother, could that have been the star that shone on baby Jesus?"

She said, "Possibly. We don't know, do we?" We talked about the star and about Bethlehem and what it was like. When we got to my grandmother's house, I didn't want to go in. We sat outside and she went over the story of Christmas.

I remember her telling me, "Mary was put down bad." The Bible doesn't talk about that, but at that time in history, and her an unwed mother, imagine. When Mary went to see Elizabeth, could it have been that it was so hard the way people would

My mother talked about how Joseph didn't care -- he knew the true story. He knew it was God himself that had placed that baby with them.

The way she sat and told it, it was so real to me. I sit here a good 60 years later, and I can see that night just as plain, and how bright that star was.

David Cecelski is the Whichard Distinguished Visiting Professor in the Humanities at East Carolina University.

[Audio Recording](#) ^[3]: Interview with Madge Guthrie and Wanda Willis by David S. Cecelski, 5 July 1995, K-0070, in the Southern Oral History Program Collection #4007, Southern Historical Collection, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. <http://dc.lib.unc.edu/cdm/compoundobject/collection/sohp/id/12914> ^[3]

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