

DATHA

By

Rev James Julius Sams, D.D.

[Excerpts about Christmas]

Notes by Bill Riski, December 17th, 2020:

1. Based on my research, the Rev. J. Julius Sams wrote down his reflections on Datha Island at the request of his nephew, Conway Whittle Sams, in about 1905.
2. When read in full, the implication is he was reflecting mostly on his time as a young boy, just old enough to shoot a gun. I grew up learning to hunt with my own Father starting at about age 12. Based on my own experiences, I would estimate Julius on Datha Island for most of these adventures in about 1835 - 1840. Comments in his full memoir are consistent with this conclusion.
3. This excerpt focuses on what the Reverend had to say about Christmas on Datha.

The first room of the middle house was called the girls' room. It was the scene of all the **Christmas** preparation and completion. Its very atmosphere seemed to savor of jelly, mince pie, cheese, cakes (a perished pastry, I believe) and Syllabub. The room opposite was known as the big bedroom. After you left the middle house you came to the east house.

Christmas was the merriest and saddest time. The merriest, because we were all together. The saddest, because the time was coming for us to part again.

The girls' room (as it was called) and the Brick Oven of all places were the most attractive places to us. We were continually peeping in at the door of the room asking for little bits of crust to put in the over, to be baked with the more respectable pies. Then we would come back and beg for little bits of cinnamon out of the jelly bag to put in our mouths, and go off chewing as though they were quids of tobacco, enjoying them more for this conceit than because they were pieces of cinnamon and penetrated with the other sweet things with which they had been mixed in the jelly bag.

The fixture was this: two chairs, back to back, and bag between suspended by a string to each, full of all kinds of sweet mixtures and dripping away, drip, drip, drip. We always wondered whether it would get through in time for **Christmas** and more than that whether there would be enough for all. But slow and sure, clear as crystal, solid, plenty and to spare. And then the Middle piazza was never much frequented by us until **Christmas** times.

The girls' room, where all the **Christmas** mysteries were carried on, opened into a narrow passage which lead out into the middle piazza. How our little feet did trot up and down those steps in and out that passage, all around peeping in and wishing to enter but knowing it was forbidden ground. The old brick oven was in the yard. We took a great interest in the heating of it, always thinking the cook too slow and rejoicing in the good tidings, hot enough, hot enough. We were very active in carrying the news from the oven to the room. Then such a number of waiters, all full of all kinds of pies would come streaming out of that room down the steps to the oven. We never felt uneasy about the pies. The wonder was where were the people to eat them all. Twenty-seven mouths though as was often the case, soon left shelves empty that had been crowded.

On **Christmas** Eve we generally formed our plans for the morning. They were generally two. One was put into our heads by the negroes. They told us that at midnight the sheep got on their knees. We often planned to get up and go out and see this wonderful sight. But if ever we went it must have been in our dreams. The other plan was to get up by daylight, go around to some of the negro houses and cry, Merry **Christmas**. This we did, but there was not much enjoyment in it. The mutterings of the negroes in their half awakened condition rather dampened our enthusiasm.

I ought not to forget the Chapel under the great oak tree that shaded the grave yard. In those days I cannot say that I was especially fond of the Chapel at **Christmas**. And yet it is **Christmas** that reminds me of it. My Father had a book of sermons by Burden. There was one on the text, "Let us now go to Bethlehem and see, etc." and even now whenever I hear that text read, or read it myself, it matters not where I am or about what I am thinking at the time, my thoughts immediately go to the **Christmas** sermon in that Chapel. The power of association is wonderful.

Yesterday I was returning home, after paying some visits, when seven or eight wild ducks flew over my head with that whistling sound, caused by the wings cutting the air and immediately my thoughts ran back to the days of which I am writing and in the quickest time possible brought up scene after scene of things that happened then. I said that **Christmas** was not only the merriest but the saddest time. The saddest, because we were about to separate, some to return to their home on one island, some to their home on another, and others to Beaufort. We boys were amongst these last. It was indeed the saddest time for us, because we were about to stop playing before we were tired of play and to go to work before we were ready to work. But when would we have been tired of the one or ready for the other?