

## THE CHRISTMAS WITHOUT A CHRISTMAS TREE

There are many reasons to celebrate this season, but the biggest one is that it is a time when families get together.

Long long ago when she was a child in Thailand with her parents, she and her sister were sent away to a boarding school. At Christmas time they had a month to spend with their parents and brother, and that was an idyllic time.

They did not have a living room where Toys R Us vomited all over the floor with gifts from grandpa and grandma and aunts and uncles. It was a bamboo house built on stilts with a split bamboo floor where, when it was scrubbed, the excess water spilled through under the house. Mother and Dad tried putting up an artificial tree that had been sent to them along with some gifts for them and for us children. They had just gotten the decorations put on the tree, when suddenly Dad remarked that the walls of a bamboo house have eyes all around watching everything that strange white family do. He realized that in that part of the world there are trees that look like a Christmas tree where they tie their prayers to blow in the wind. He felt that this would not be understood by these newly Christian people. So they took it down all the while apologizing to their children for the lack of a tree. She did not care -- she had her parents, they were all together as a family, and it was enough.

The stockings were hung on the wall in anticipation of our morning gift opening. Dad read the Christmas story by lamp light in his wonderful sonorous bass voice. "And there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the fields watching their flocks by night ...." As he read we pictured the scene. Then Dad took out his violin and mom took out her mandolin and they began to play the old Christmas carols. We lifted up our sweet childish voices with theirs as we sang until we could sing no more. Next morning was a rush to open our gifts -- each of us receiving a book, some oranges and some nuts and candy canes and some items of clothing. We were so delighted to get books. They were so rare over there that if we were given some out of date Sunday School papers they were read over and over again. We traced the coloring pictures on the back and colored them many times as well.

After the family gift opening, the pageant and feast were prepared in the village. A long line of wire was strung from the guest house roof (a small house on stilts with one bedroom and a living room where guests stayed when they visited) to the roof of the chapel. On it, with a hole punctured through it, was a star covered in aluminum foil. The villagers all had parts in the pageant with Mary and Joseph coming to the guest house which was their manger and sitting up on the porch as they received the guests of the shepherds and then the wise men following the tin foil star as it was drawn across the wire as the Lahu tribal pastor read the Christmas story in their own language.

Then games were played with the visiting villages from all around participating for prizes like boxes of matches and cards of safety pins -- all treasures to them.

Finally, there was feasting and much joy and then all the guests left to get home before dark. There was nothing like this Christmas without a tree for her. The real meaning of sharing Christ's love with others and being with her family exemplified Christmas to her. For her Christmas is not a tree or a big dinner and many gifts -- it is being with family and sharing God's love.