

AEaster Traditions from Mississippi@
By: Mark A. Chinn
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I don't think there's a better place to be than Mississippi during the Easter holiday. I think I have a unique appreciation for Easter in Mississippi because I was originally from McComb and was transferred to Chicago with my family. Our special treat each year was the return to Mississippi for Easter. The traditions of Easter in Mississippi are burned into my memory like no others. Easter means many things: traditions, memories, beautiful weather and plants, and the most spiritual time of the year.

Preparations for Easter begin long in advance of the holiday. I think the first preparation is the buying of the Easter Sunday clothes. Unlike today, we didn't buy a lot of clothes back in my childhood. We had to wait for special events like the start of school or Easter. Easter usually meant fine new dress shoes and a new jacket and tie.

Then there was Palm Sunday. I vividly remember how neat I thought it was to get a Palm to wave up and down the Church aisle. After Palm Sunday, Easter preparations began in earnest. One of my favorite rituals was making colored Easter eggs out of real eggs. We would stick a pin in each side of the egg and then blow out the yoke and egg white. It was always a tricky operation to avoid breaking the shell. Then we got to mix colors and settle the egg shells in the colored water to dye them. These colored eggs were then set out on the counter and on the table.

A few days before Easter, we would take our train trip back to Mississippi. We usually wore our new Easter clothes on the train. For us, the Easter trip to Mississippi was like going to Disney World. We boarded the Panama Limited in Chicago around 6:00 p.m. The Panama was a fine experience. We were leaving the dirty, snow-covered black earth of Illinois; and we knew we would awaken the next morning and see red clay, blooming dogwoods, and florescent azaleas blooming bright reds, pinks and whites. The trees had leaves, and even the air smelled and felt different.

When in McComb for Easter, we stayed with the Dr. Wendell Holmes family. The Holmes= house smelled of wonderful food, which was always available in plenty. Lunch was always a special

event. Up north, I was accustomed to a lunch of peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, Oreos and milk on a cold, chrome table. In Mississippi, lunch was Adinner.@ Fried chicken, rice and gravy, butter beans, black eyed peas, greens, biscuits and cranberry sauce all were set on a beautiful dining room table. And there were always two big pitchers of tea. One pitcher was ASchweat Tea@ and the other unsweetened tea, which they jokingly labeled the “Yankee Pitcher” because only the Yankees drank unsweetened tea.

The first thing I did when I got to Mississippi was call on my friend John Mayer. When I got over there, the first thing he would show me were the multi colored chicks he and his brothers got for Easter. They were bright blues, yellows and greens and they were hardly big enough to fit in your hand. There were usually about ten of them and they kept them in a box to keep the dogs away from them. We would pull them out and pet them and watch them run around.

Easter morning brought a “sunrise service.” There is something very special about celebrating Easter at dawn. After church, we were allowed to get the Easter baskets filled with goodies that the Easter Bunny had left at the end of our beds. Then there was the main event: the annual Easter Egg Hunt. This was a very competitive event. Some of the eggs were simply pushed down in monkey grass, but some were placed in azalea bushes where they blended with the blossoms. My friend Lane Holmes always won the competition. As the years went by, my frustration mounted until someone let it slip that Lane would wake up early and watch out of the window as my Mother hid the eggs.

I still enjoy Easter egg hunts. Years ago we took our daughter Courtney, then aged 3, to a hunt at the Jackson Country Club. There must have been two hundred children there. We thought it would be an exciting event for Courtney just as the egg hunt competitions were for me years before. Suddenly, we couldn’t find Courtney. We looked everywhere until we finally found her seated on a curb all by herself with no eggs in her basket. She didn’t “want to hunt Easter eggs.”

Today, we conduct the annual Easter egg hunt in the front yard before church. Since we have four children of very different ages, we developed a color-coded difficulty system in an attempt to “handicap” the event and make it fair. The oldest child, Courtney, loses this competition every year. The

second child, Casey, always wins. I wonder if Casey gets up early to watch the Easter Bunny hide the eggs, just as Lane Holmes did 45 years ago.

Of course, we all know the true meaning of Easter, and that it is the greatest message that we can hear. But there is room for savoring those special moments of our Mississippi Easter: from Palm Sunday to wonderful family dinners; to enjoying warm weather, dogwoods and azaleas; and, of course, Easter egg hunts. Savor them all.

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