

A County-Wide Christmas in 1929

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By: Wendy Meyers

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“On Christmas afternoon at 3 o’clock, a community Christmas tree was held at Bryson City for people less fortunate than others. Long before the hour arrived hundreds of people over the county kept gathering. There was snow and ice on the ground and the exercises were held in the courthouse from which the tree, standing high with hundreds of colored lights, and 10 feet above it a star, its five points lighted, shining to guide people to the place, could be seen. It has been a joy to all who have seen it for the past week and will stand in the square until the New Year.”

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The Bryson City Christmas Tree, 1929

Source: The Everett Hotel

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“Bryson City is a small town with about 1,500 inhabitants. Just what has been done will be of interest to other small towns. About three months ago Mayor E.C. Bryson, the youngest mayor of the State, expressed the idea of a community Christmas tree to G. C. Dugas, vice president and manager of the Smoky Mountain Power Company. Mr. Dugas went to work. Others became interested as soon as it was announced and for six weeks untiring efforts have been expended by about 20 people.”



Edwin Constant Bryson
Source: UNC yearbook,
1925 (Ancestry.com)



Group at 1930 Ela Dam dedication of second unit. Identified persons (some are speculative) are:

1) Dr. A.M. Bennett; 2) Edwin C. Bryson; 3) Stanley W. Black; 4) Jack Coburn; 5) J.B. McCrary; 6) H.H. White; 7) Kelly Bennett; 8) Anne Bryson, 10) Orson Burlingame; 11) J.A. McCrary; 12) E.L. McKee; 13) Gertrude Dills McKee; 14) R.L. Snelson; 16) Harry Diltmore; 19) Dr. D.R. Bryson; 20) G.C. Dugas; 21) Clarence C. Angel.

Those listed in red take their rest in the Bryson City Cemetery.

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“.....Owing to the snow which made many county roads impassable, not as many children were here as was hoped, but treats and toys have been sent as far as possible. Preparation for 1,500 children was made and over 100 baskets were fixed. Into the baskets were put a sack of flour (24 pounds), three pounds of meat, three pounds of beans, three pounds of coffee, five pounds of sugar, salt, soda and soap. Added to this were the overalls, underwear and stockings with many baskets having shoes, some with clothes and sweaters, and every thing that was available for little children where the need was greatest.”

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“.....A goal of \$1,500 was set at the first meeting held. It seemed preposterous. Many said that if \$500 was raised it would be a great success but by the generosity of all, the gifts of material things and money reached \$2,000 (*note: this is just over \$28,000 in 2016 currency*). The festival of Christmas is primarily for children. Their hearts ache if they do not have a visit from Santa Claus and it was decided to place a toy in the hands of children under 10 whenever possible. Over 1,500 toys were gathered together over 1,500 treats were fixed, and 1,800 oranges used.”

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Liberty Coaster, circa 1923
Source: chainsawjournal.com



1929 Effanbee Doll
Source: alldolls.org

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Judge TD Bryson; photo by IK Stearns,
courtesy of Carl Grueninger, Jr

“There wasn’t room for one other person in the courthouse when the hour arrived. The galleries and floor space were filled. Mayor Bryson explained the movement and spoke of the many unknown friends who had heeded the call. Dr. R. L. Clear* opened the exercises with prayer and a chorus of singers sang some of the lovely Christmas carols. Judge T. D. Bryson spoke for a few minutes and then the children were called for and girls passed on one side and boys on the other of long tables laden with the toys, which had been arranged separately, as other people handed the bags of candy and an orange to the little folks.”

* Spelling error by article writer; this was Dr. R.L. Creal, pastor at First Baptist

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“....The baskets were then given out and those who were not here for theirs, were either taken by others to them, or were carried by Bryson City men to the different parts of the county. Many other names have been reported since Christmas Day and foodstuff and some clothing have been purchased for them.

Special mention should be made of the work of the executive committee, and other women who left their homes for days to get the toys, treats, and clothing assembled to Santa Claus who was busy for many days, of those who got the tree, of men who labored hard, of the kindness of the men in the A.&P. store who ground and sacked the 440 pounds of coffee given by Westfeldt Bros. of New Orleans, and a bag of sugar, which was a gift, and of others whom it also impossible to name, for their cooperation in this move. “

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Maple Springs School pupils, circa 1927

Source: Clifford King

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“.....It is a Christmas that will long be remembered. There are many who had a real Christmas joy on December 25 because these people made it for them. If there is another town in the state with a population of 1,500 people which has cared for as many families in the county as Bryson City, and furnished toys and treats for 1,500 children, it has not been reported. This is the first time that a community tree has been held in Swain County. It may be the last or it may not but for one time a happy feeling entered the hearts of those who received and in those who gave, who remembered how Christ said: ‘It is more blessed to give than to receive’.”