

# Voices: An unintentional tradition

By SARAH ZOLLNER CASE  
Special to the East Oregonian

One year when I was in third or fourth grade, my family's Christmas plans were interrupted by forces of nature. As the holiday approached, Mom baked in preparation for our trip three hours south to my grandparents' house. She made several fruit pies to contribute to the much anticipated Christmas dinner we would enjoy with my grandparents, aunts, uncles and cousins.

Our intention was to wake up Christmas morning in our own beds, open gifts around our tree, eat breakfast and then pile into the car and head to Roseburg for a few days' visit. What happened instead was disappointing to say the least. A winter storm rolled in, and the east wind swept through our suburban town and left the roads encased in thick ice. To make matters worse, our neighborhood was perched high on a hill, and our neighborhood street that led to the main road was treacherous and impassable. Driving on it in a car full of kids was out of the question.

We were crestfallen. Of course we looked forward to opening the gifts under the tree, but our family's approach to Christmas gifts was relatively low key. We knew there weren't any Barbie Dream Houses or Nintendo gaming systems to be found; nothing amazing enough to distract us from being stuck inside at home when we wanted to be somewhere else.

When we woke up Christmas morning, my parents had hatched a cheer-up plan. After opening gifts, they announced that we were having pie and ice cream for breakfast. Mom laid out the spread of pies and we cut into all of them. We had free rein to build the breakfast plate of our dreams: choose your favorite kind or try some of each. Warm it up in the microwave if you want. Plop a scoop of ice cream on top. It was decadent and unexpected, and it raised the spirits in the room 110%.

Not surprisingly, we three kids immediately decided that henceforth, Breakfast Pie was the new Christmas Normal, and should be planned accordingly.

For more than three decades, as my brothers and

I grew up, moved out, and established our adult lives, we kept on. Every Christmas, we would wake up in our own homes with our partners and kids, open gifts around our respective trees, and then drive across town to my parents' house, where we would open more gifts and tuck into a pie buffet. Over the years, as spouses and partners and joined our crew, or when other extended family members joined us for the holiday, they were always surprised and delighted by the magic of Breakfast Pie.

The truth is that Breakfast Pie was the most constant part of our Christ-

mas celebration for many years. The tradition came with us when my parents moved from that house on the hill in the suburbs to a neighborhood in the city. Long after an ugly family rift severed our relationship to my mom's sister and her kids — the cousins we were so excited to see the year of the ice storm — Breakfast Pie was our holiday companion. The church we grew up in folded, and we found new places to worship on Christmas Eve, but Breakfast Pie kept the faith. Our grandparents passed and there was no longer a house in Roseburg

to visit, but Breakfast Pie was still with us.

I ate Breakfast Pie in a bathrobe at my parents' house the year I was miscarrying on Christmas morning, and again years later, we gathered for pie the first Christmas after my young son died. There was something comforting and connecting in this shared rhythm of our holiday; joy in the midst of grief and disappointment, something solid and familiar when other parts of life were unpredictable and unwelcome.

In the beginning, mom made the pies, and there were always at least three or four to choose from. Apple, peach,

blueberry, and pumpkin made regular appearances. Later, my brother's wife, who had lost her mother to cancer when she was 19, started bringing a homemade lemon meringue pie every year; it was her mother's famous recipe. I added a Tollhouse pie, because if you're going to eat dessert in the morning, why stop short of chocolate? Of course there was ice cream and whipped cream too. We're not animals.

And that's how a nutritionally questionable meal that started in the 1980s as a consolation prize for disappointed grade schoolers became the stuff of family

legend — a treasured tradition and a hallmark of the holiday.

For the past two years, various factors including the coronavirus pandemic have colluded to bring an end to the era of Breakfast Pie. Will we ever gather as an extended family and eat ourselves into a carb coma before 11 AM again? Hard to say. But for 35 years, this enduring family tradition did what we needed it to. Breakfast Pie got us through that first disappointing Christmas, and showed us that even something frivolous can become a meaningful touch point for family connection.

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And that's why the East Oregonian will be running, from time to time, stories from students who are in my writing class, which I've been teaching for the past 10 years in Portland.

I take great satisfaction in helping so-called nonwriters find and write stories from their lives and experiences. They walk into my room believing they don't have what it takes to be a writer. I remind them if they follow their hearts, they will discover they are storytellers.

As we all are at our core.

Some of these stories have nothing to do with Pendleton or Umatilla County. They do, however, have everything to do with life.

If you are interested in contacting me to tell me your story, I'd like to hear from you.

**Tom Hallman Jr.,  
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Tom Hallman Jr. is a Pulitzer Prize-winning feature writer for the Oregonian newspaper. He's also a writing coach and has an affinity for Umatilla County.

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