Their first Noel

The Toan family around their dining room table in their home in the parsonage at Pickett Post. From l. to r.: Joe, Ngo Thuy Uy, Jack, and Toan Uy Quan.

Boat family getting ready for their first Christmas

By JOAN MOONEY
Staff Writer

PICKETT POST — Almost three months to the day after the Toan family arrived here as Vietnamese refugees from Hong Kong, they will celebrate Christmas for the first time.

Being Buddhists, they were not familiar with Christmas customs. But they will take part in the holiday activities of the Bethel Presbyterian Church in Pickett Post, which sponsored their arrival.

Toan Uy Quan will be able to send a special gift to his brother, who is still in the refugee camp in Hong Kong. A picture of his family's first Christmas tree.

The Bethel congregation will put up its tree and after the church ceremony, the members will carry it down the hill and into the Toans' living room.

Toan Uy Quan and his wife Ngo Thuy Uy are on their way to becoming part of the community. They both have jobs, he at the Gallaway Construction Company, and she at the sewing plant of Jocesan Manufacturing in Salem.

"They're self-sufficient now, except that they don't know how to drive," said Joe McAllister, the head of the church committee that welcomed the Toans. Their bosses, who are the members of the congregation, drive church member takes them shopping Saturday mornings.

The Toans live in the church parsonage, a white wooden house surrounded by woods. It is equipped with everything from tableware to a television set.

Their biggest problem is learning English. They must still answer complex questions through an interpreter, Suong Davis, a Vietnamese woman who has lived in Walhalla with her American husband since she escaped from Vietnam in 1975.

They take English lessons in the evening from a volunteer with the Oconee County Adult Education Program, Zora Barnett, who comes to their house. During conversations with Americans, Toan keeps an English-Vietnamese and English-Chinese dictionary handy so that difficult words can be written and looked up. The Toans are ethnic Chinese and speak Chinese among themselves.

They are grateful for the warm response of the Pickett Post congregation, but changing cultures suddenly is never easy.

Toan said Friday he was lonely at first, when the family's lack of English limited them. But now he is very happy to be here.

In the short time they've been here, what have the Toans seen as the greatest difference from their home country?

"Freedom," Toan said in English, dispensing neatly with the explanations of his Vietnamese interpreter.

Davis explained that in Vietnam, citizens must get the approval of government simply to have friends stay overnight at their house.

The difference in the standard of living is perhaps the greatest change from Vietnam. When asked about the changes for a Vietnamese woman coming here, Toan's wife May said that if she sees a pretty dress here, she can go ahead and buy it. In Vietnam, there are fewer clothes available and she would have to save for months to buy a dress.

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and Tru.

She explained that everyone at Walhalla Elementary School was mispronouncing their names—pronounced "Key" and "Chew"—so they didn't know what they were being called on in class. McAllister told her about nicknames and offered his own name and the name of the pastor, Jack Stevenson.

The next day, when called on by the teacher, Khu said, "No Khu, Jack," and pointed to his brother and said, "No Tru, Joe."

Even with the language barrier, the Toans have made friends with their sponsors in the