

YULETIDE MEMORIES: DECORATING THE CHRISTMAS TREE

When did it end? When did the tradition of Santa Claus decorating the Christmas tree while the children lay asleep in their beds disappear? Is there a family somewhere in which the children still awaken on Christmas morning and get their first look at their family's gloriously decorated Christmas tree?

I suspect that the tradition of Santa decorating the tree suffered a major setback with the introduction of the artificial Christmas tree. The ersatz evergreens provided new flexibility as families could decorate them the day after Thanksgiving without risking having a brown, dried-up tree by Christmas Day.

Many families still elect to go the natural route though. The experience of choosing that "perfect" evergreen has become one of some families' special holiday events, with the entire family going along to help Mom and Dad make the big decision. When Ken Davis of Richmond, Virginia, was a young boy, he lived on Davidson's Siding Road with his parents, Floyd and Gertrude Davis. Ken has never forgotten the Christmas of 1948, when he greatly disapproved of his parents' choice of a Christmas tree.

"Too young then," Ken said, "and too old now, I cannot remember the name of the fruit market, later called Hilltop and then Frank's, where we bought our tree. Its makeshift tree lot extended up the slope from the building toward the intersection of Routes 40 and 166.

"I remember the wind blowing from the water tower and across Route 40, blasting snow straight into our faces as we shopped for a tree. Every tree was tested by a thud of the base onto the frozen red-dog, which added to the maelstrom."

Floyd and Gertrude finally selected a tree, and four-year-old Ken was devastated by their choice.

"For six inches, the spruce had decided to grow two tops!" Ken stared in horror. "I didn't want our Christmas tree to resemble a sling-shot!"

His protests were ignored, Ken recalled, and after the tree spent a few days on the Davis's back porch, "the day of abomination arrived. My father proudly secured the tree with cross sticks nailed to the trunk, and he immersed the cut end, with sand, rocks and water, into our spare coal bucket. I was in tears again with the ugly silhouette casting demonic shadows against the wall.

"The tree was almost completely decorated before my mother, attempting to place that gold thingy with a spire and a ball-base that everyone in Brownsville in the 40s used as a tree-top ornament, made an astonishing discovery.

"Our tree has two tops!' she announced in surprise. And of course, unable to contain my week-long pent-up frustrations, I shouted, 'That's what I've been trying to tell you!'"

Floyd solved the problem in a flash.

"My father quickly got the butcher knife, cut the smaller of the tops, and bent up the survivor. The gold thingy displayed very well."

The perfect Christmas tree is hard to find, as Charlie Brown will attest. Since nature is rarely symmetrical, there is an art to positioning one's undecorated tree to its best advantage before hanging the first ornament. Time-honored technique requires that someone must turn the tree endlessly, trying to find a position that will conceal the glaring bare spot which, despite careful inspection at the tree lot, no one noticed until now.

That lucky tree turner was usually Dad.

"Dad would be lying on the floor," remarked South Brownsville native Jan Rowe, "half under the tree, turning it and getting hit in the face with branches as my mother decided which position was best. This was usually good for an argument."

Positioning the tree was not the only challenge to be met. Timing was important too. If you put up the tree too early in the season, someone stretching to reach a gift under the tree on Christmas Day would be pelted with dry pine needles from above. To avoid such a shower, the journey to the tree lot was usually put off until the week before Christmas.

"To purchase our Christmas tree, we walked back the narrow, arched brick walkway by Sheehan's Market on Market Street," recalled Nancy Campbell Bender of Grindstone. "My father, Ralph, would take us kids with him to help choose the tree. In later years, I remember that he took us into the woods somewhere to cut our own, which was an adventure of another sort."

"Each year after I had my daughter in the early '80s," commented Jennie Abbadini of Brownsville, "my husband and I would take her to

AJ's Christmas Tree Farm to cut down the perfect Christmas tree. Regardless of the weather, be it rain, snow, sunshine, or ice storm, we walked the woods in search of the perfect tree."

"I remember going out each year and cutting a tree the day before Christmas," Joanne Peet of Poland, Ohio. "We would bring it back to our Brownsville home and set it up undecorated. Then we would all be given new matching pajamas and sent to bed to wait for Santa. The next morning when we came down the steps in our new pajamas, we would see the lighted, decorated tree for the first time."

Santa Claus had decorated the tree during the night. Since in those days Santa was not burdened with sacks full of computers, exercise machines, and DVD players, perhaps he had more time to decorate a few million Christmas trees during the eight hours or so allotted to him. Former West Brownsville resident Ross Snowdon says Santa never missed decorating the tree at his house.

"In the 1920s," Ross told me, "I lived with my mom and dad on Railroad Street in West Brownsville. It was the custom to not allow the children to see the Christmas tree until Christmas morning. The tree was kept hidden in the coal bin until Dad brought it up for trimming, after the kids went to bed. Our tree had candles for lights. When the candles were lit, Dad was with them all the time so the tree would not cause a fire."

Ross tried to keep that family tradition alive, but fate intervened.

"My wife and I carried on the tradition of Santa trimming the tree (not with candles), but when our daughter was about three years old, she visited a neighbor a few days before Christmas. She saw their decorated tree with presents under it, and she developed a bad case of hives from disappointment that Santa had missed stopping at our house.

"After that, we no longer waited until after she went to bed to trim the tree or put wrapped gifts under the tree. We began the tradition of opening one gift on Christmas Eve, which made our daughter happy, and we have continued that practice ever since."

West Brownsville native Jim McAndrews echoed Ross Snowdon's experience.

"When I was a young boy in West Brownsville," Jim explained, "the tree was on the front porch, but it was never put up until the kids had gone to bed. We had a round wreath on the door and a stack of candles in the window, and when we came downstairs on Christmas morning, the tree was completely decorated and the presents were under the tree."

"On Christmas Eve," added another West Brownsville native, Darlene Johnson Widmer, "my brother Rick and I would go out on the

back porch and watch my dad place the fresh tree in its holder. We were allowed to stay up to watch him place the tree in the corner of our living room, but then we had to go to bed.

“Santa Claus always trimmed our tree,” Darlene continued, “so Christmas morning was extra exciting for us. I remember so well the fragrance of the pine as we crept down the stairs to see what Santa had brought us. It must have been around six a.m., because it was still dark outside.

“Santa always had beautiful silver icicles adorning the tree, along with candy canes and popcorn balls wrapped in brightly colored cellophane. We had a special angel that was placed on the treetop, and the tree always had multicolored lights which looked so beautiful with the icicles.”

When Santa visited the Union Street Extension home of W. James “Whiz” Mountain, he really had his arms full. Santa even brought the tree!

“When I was growing up in the 1930s,” Whiz told me, “Santa brought the tree, decorated it, and placed the wrapped presents under the tree. I will never forget the awe of waking up and going downstairs to view such a spectacular presentation. It was truly magical!”

Some of the well-worn ornaments that decorate the family Christmas tree have stories behind them, and they are often the catalysts that spur older family members to pass on family holiday stories to the younger generation. Next, more readers share their family’s Christmas tree traditions.

CHRISTMAS TREE ORNAMENTS ARE RICH WITH FAMILY HISTORY

At Christmas time, a dark green, seven-foot-tall package, brimming with history, occupies a special place in many homes. It is the family Christmas tree, glistening with ornaments that have fascinating stories behind them, loaded with decorations rich in family traditions just waiting to be handed down. You can add to your children’s knowledge of your family history by telling them the stories of the special ornaments on your Christmas tree, those timeworn ones that hang unnoticed among the glitzy modern bulbs and decorations.

“In the 40s and 50s,” Penn-Craft native Lois Artis Marks remembered, “we always had a fresh-cut tree. We would put up the tree the week before Christmas, with an angel on top, multi-colored lights, and old balls that we saved and wrapped for the next tree. We put angel

hair all over the tree, and the lights shined through beautifully. It was magical just to sit and look at the lighted tree in the evenings.”

Ah, those lovely multi-colored lights . . . could be a pain!

“Our tree had the kind of string lights that when one light went out, they all went out,” lamented Bill Johnson of Olean, New York, formerly of Bull Run Road. “What a job to find the burnt-out light or two!”

“My father hung the lights on our tree,” said Nancy Campbell Bender, who grew up on Prospect Street, “then we all helped decorate the tree. We had many pre-war beaded ornaments from Czechoslovakia, some of which we still use in our own homes today. There was also gold tinsel, though not the synthetic stuff one buys today. This was made of a genuine metallic material, and although it has tarnished and congealed over the years, we still have some of it and use it!”

In addition to old-fashioned tinsel, some readers remember other traditional types of decorations.

“We lived on Cadwallader Street in the mid-1940s,” said Darlene Johnson Widmer, “and our tree was always decorated with candy canes and popcorn balls wrapped in brightly colored cellophane.”

“My sister and I,” added Jennie Abbadini of Brownsville, “would string popcorn and make paper chains from construction paper to help decorate the tree.”

And do you remember the “flocked” trees?

“I was born in 1952,” recalled Second Street native Jan Rowe, “so I’m remembering the 1950s and 1960s, when ‘flocked’ trees were popular. Some came already sprayed with artificial snow. Our family’s trees were sprayed by my mom or older sister Karen. Some ornaments that I still have bear traces of this snow.”

Of course, at one time all Christmas trees were natural, but by the 1960s silver-colored artificial trees began to appear. Who can forget that revolving plastic disk that projected blue, yellow, and red light on the reflective aluminum needles?

“Our silver artificial tree had blue bulbs,” remarked Telegraph Road native Darla Walker Pichard, “and a light under the tree that turned, shining different colors on it. My brother and I loved that tree, and when my mom and dad wanted to get an artificial green tree, we were upset because it would not seem like Christmas without our silver tree!”

Over the years, the types of trees have changed and the ornaments have too. Rare is the tree nowadays that is decorated with those large, hot-burning, multi-colored lights, chain links made of construction paper, strings of threaded popcorn, angel hair, or spray-on snow. Yet whether the tree you remember was green or silver, real or artificial, on the floor beneath its boughs was often found a miniature village, an electric train,

or both.

“After my grandmother’s tree was completely decorated,” recalled Kim Snyder Davis, who grew up in Blainesburg, “Grandma would get out the Christmas village that she had made in ceramics class. She and only she could put the cotton down to make the snow. She would arrange the lights, village and people under the tree while I sat there, watching and listening to the stories of how and when she made each particular piece.”

An integral part of many under-the-tree villages was an electric train, just as real trains were essential in the life of a typical American small town. This tradition, still popular, has been around for a long time.

“I was born in 1930,” remarked Bill Johnson, “and in the 1930s and 1940s, we always had a three-track electric train under the tree.”

“The train in our under-the-tree village was such fun to watch,” added Darlene Widmer. “My dad made a barn, some houses, and a tunnel to go along with the train set, and we would watch the train go around the tree for long periods of time. It was so much fun, just lying there and pretending to be riding the train through the village.”

Nancy Bender told me that her first birthday present, a Lionel electric train, “was soon transferred to my brother, Scott. The train layout became more elaborate each year with villages, mountains, bridges, and smoke-blowing locomotives. Scott and my dad always had a friendly competition with the Alan Taylor family as to who had the best train layout.”

Protecting those under-the-tree villages and train layouts from unexpected disaster was and still is a challenge, particularly in any household with small children or pets.

“We have a large Christmas village and train under the tree,” says Jennie Abbadini, “and we also have a seventy-pound chocolate Labrador retriever named Holly. She has never bothered the tree or the train, but she repeatedly knocks an elderly couple off their bench at the edge of the Christmas village every year!”

Larry Beck of Blainesburg has taken the Christmas train concept to a “higher” level.

“Last year was the first time that I put a train IN the tree!” Larry informed me. “The little ‘N gauge’ train goes in one direction among the branches, while the tree, decorated with many moving ornaments, rotates in the opposite direction.”

Enjoying creatively trimmed Christmas trees was a wonderful feature of holiday visiting, but even fresh-cut Christmas trees could only stay fresh for a short time. The danger of fire from a dried-out tree always lurked in the thoughts of Mom and Dad, so New Year’s Day was

often selected for the task of undecorating the tree. Ornaments were carefully removed from the branches, wrapped individually in tissue paper, and packed into boxes where they would wait patiently in the closet, attic, or garage until called upon next December to reawaken the Spirit of Christmas Past.

With its brown-tipped needles beginning to drop to the floor, the once-beautiful Christmas tree, stripped of its lights, ornaments, and tinsel, was suddenly forlorn and unwanted. Yet for some Christmas trees, New Year's Day wasn't the end of the line. Occasionally, a tree would be granted a "second life."

"Our tree was taken down just before the Russian Orthodox Christmas," said Bill Johnson. "We placed it out in the front yard for someone to take for their Russian Christmas, and it was always picked up by someone. I remember several times when someone came to the door to ask for our discarded tree."

"Normally our tree stayed up for a week or so after Christmas," added Nancy Bender, "but Christmas 1945 found it staying up until February 1946, when my dad finally returned home from Europe, where he served with the American Red Cross in World War II. By the time he got home, our Christmas tree was bare and brown – and beautiful. We never had a happier Christmas."

Ruth Chambers Banks of Cokeburg recalled a similar experience.

"One year when my brother, William Alva Chambers of Brownsville, was in the Navy, he could not get leave for Christmas, and he asked me if I would keep my Christmas tree up until he could get home on leave.

"Well, by the time he got home weeks later, all of the needles had fallen off the short-needled tree, the branches were sagging, and the decorations were mostly lying on the floor. The only gifts still under the tree were for my brother, and they were covered with pine needles, icicles, and fallen decorations.

"A friend of mine came to visit. When she walked into the living room and saw our tree, she began to laugh hysterically. Needless to say, when my brother came home three weeks after Christmas and saw the tree, he thought it was really funny too. But he really appreciated that I had left the tree up for him.

"Thanks for jogging my memory and bringing back a Christmas that I will never forget," Ruth said. "My dearly loved brother passed away three years ago, and so this has been a bittersweet memory for me."

The discarded Christmas trees of Brownsville area families were often placed out in front yards, where on the Saturday morning after New Year's Day, they were picked up by the community's volunteer firemen.

That Saturday night, the whole town was invited to a massive bonfire in the grassy parking area in front of old Brownie Stadium. The fire department-supervised bonfire was held to discourage individuals from burning their own trees in their back yards, a potential fire hazard.

The bonfire always drew a big crowd on a cold winter night, and the firemen served hot dogs and marshmallows to the hundreds of residents who showed up to witness the huge blaze. As the spectators talked quietly and watched the sparks from the crackling mountain of burning Christmas trees fly high into the night air, they each understood that they were witnessing the holiday's final act. The final curtain was falling on another wonderful Christmas season.

When the flames subsided and the once-huge mound of trees was reduced to a glowing pile of embers, the residents headed for the warmth of their homes. The most festive season of the year was over – and a long stretch of winter lay ahead 'til the first robin of spring.