

## MORE CHRISTMAS MEMORIES

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'Writer's Corner'

In 1950 we opened Community Grocery across from the Smith County Commission Sale Barn and moved into the house on the corner of Dogwood and Jefferson. It was my first Christmas as a "town boy."



Our habit was always to harvest our own Christmas tree by walking around the pastures and finding a nice cedar that had, through some craftiness, managed to avoid the bush hook and attained a height of six feet or so. At first, Daddy would go with us to hunt for the perfect tree, but later it became a "bonding" activity for my sister, Donnieta, and me.

We were seldom of one mind what would make a good Christmas tree. Her feeling was that the tree must be of a perfect height, perfectly round, and full on every side. My feeling was the tree should be of some height between my shoulder and as high as she could reach, somewhat green in color, and full on at least one side, the other side being the one we would turn to the wall anyway.

Off we would go, up Jefferson, across the stylus at Clyde and Margret White's house, and into the front pasture (Now occupied by streets and houses, but then Mr. Hubert Turner's front pasture). Donnieta would walk past what I considered a perfectly good tree and spy one in the distance saying, "Let's go look at that one, I think it is just right." When we tramped to the tree she had spied, it would look less and less like the perfect tree the closer we got. Upon arrival and close inspection, it would be growing with one side shaded and therefore sparse and bare or would be actually three trees growing together. They were beautiful in the pasture but of course would fall apart when cut for a Christmas tree.

On and on this would go, until we arrived somewhere near the Cumberland River, which to my everlasting thankfulness we could not cross, therefore we were at the end of our hunt. Finally, she would be happy with a tree and we (I) would cut it down and together (I) would drag it the two miles back to the house, thereby doing irreparable damage to the top which had looked so perfect. We would trim off the lower branches (which sometimes reached up into the body of the tree, thereby creating a bare spot that would have to be turned to the wall) and place the now mortally injured tree into a large brown crock which could be filled with gravel and allowed for watering the severed tree.

My mother's greatest fear was that, "having that tree in the house is like having an open can of gasoline sitting around." "It better be watered everyday," she would warn "or it will be out on the burn pile in a week."

Once the tree was finally prepared outside, we tackled the job of bringing the tree into the living room, a pretty formidable job for an eight-year-old and a 12-year-old. The crock was heavy by nature and the needles of the old cedar would slide mercilessly down your back and stick in your hair. Finally, with a lot of fussing between us and no small amount of direction from my mother, we would manage to get the tree in position. Out of the attic came the ornaments and we would set about the decoration with a will to work. Decorating did not take long for we did not have many decorations. What we did have was “angel hair.” Now angel hair was as sinister a device of torture as ever devised by man. It was made of spun glass and could work its way into your hands, down your back, up your nose, in your hair and make you feel as if a thousand legions of fire ants had attacked. I suspect it has been outlawed by some government bureau by now.

Donnieta and I also were at odds concerning the proper method for applying “Icicles” to the tree. Her method was to carefully select each silver strand and then place it carefully on each single branch. I believe in the more “natural” approach and felt that if you simply stood several feet away and threw the icicles at random they would be divinely directed to the perfect and most natural spot. Considerable angst grew from this disagreement and it remains a subject we cannot discuss civilly to this day.

Now there is a very specific order in which things must be placed on the tree. First comes the electric lights (of the older and larger bulb version, of course), then the “roping” or garland, the round balls came next and finally any specialty ornaments we might possess. To get anything out of order was to risk the ire of your sister, which I did not try to avoid, rather I tried to provoke, being a healthy eight-year-old.

The tree was finally finished off by putting red tissue paper around the crock and covering the floor under the tree with that same paper. All the gifts came under the Christmas tree and Santa always came on Christmas Eve instead of Christmas morning. I just figured that someone had to be first and Santa, in his wisdom, had chosen our house to be subject to early arrival. It was actually a great system, except that one was so excited about playing with whatever toys you might have received that you could seldom sleep at all Christmas Eve night.

Everyone in our house got everyone else a gift, however meager your funds available might have been. I generally tried to get Mama and Daddy something together and would spend endless hours at Mr. Glen Sanderson’s Ben Franklin store looking for just the right baking dish, oven mitts, cookie sheet, ect., for their combined present. I found that Daddy was usually happy if Mama got something she like. I usually got Donnieta something that mama suggested, such as a hair barrette. For Adie, (my great aunt who lived with us) I usually got a tin box of King Leo stick candy which I would graciously help her eat prior to next Christmas, being aware of the value of stock rotation.

I remember the time in about 1953 when I began to hear rumors at school concerning the nature of the Santa connection. I considered them carefully and decided to ask Daddy about the truth of the matter. He listened to my cautiously framed question then said, “Son, communist don’t believe in Santa Claus.” Having seen the televised hearings

featuring Senator Joseph McCarthy, I knew that being associated with anything communist was the lowest thing a person could do, so I decided to straighten up and fly right, I never, repeat never, mentioned it again.

The best thing about Christmas was my Uncle Denver who was unmarried and lived in Oak Ridge and “had a big job” by our family standards. He would come home at Christmas and always came bearing gifts, the like of which we were not likely to see from any other source. I will remember forever when he bought me an electric train – a Lionel Steam Locomotive – which was a personal favorite toy from then until I developed an interest in girls, which was fairly late in my teenage life. It was always a thrill to visit Uncle Denver because you had to go to the guard shack outside Oak Ridge, manned by soldier, and give you name. Your relative then had to come to the guard shack and verify that you were, in fact, you, and that he did, in fact, want to see you. It always occur3d to me that I had some relatives which I might be likely to say, “I don’t know this guy,” and just leave him hanging.

I guess the moral here is that, like the Christmas trees, some things seem very attractive until you give them a closer inspection then you find they are filled with bare spots and hidden blemishes, and when you try to improve on them by yourself, you generally make them worse. There is a way that seems right to a man, but the end thereof is death – Proverbs 14:12.

Have a Merry Christmas, Bob.

\*Read more about Robert Rogers Chaffin in the Chaffin files and read more Writer’s corner stories at: <http://www.ajlambert.com>