

VILLAGE VIEW

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"Let's go after the Christmas tree," a suggestion made each year around mid-December, was greeted with wild enthusiasm among the children for we'd all been waiting impatiently for visible signs that the long-anticipated holiday was truly about to arrive.

Preparations to go for the tree were more involved and more fun than checking Dad's wallet to make sure there was adequate cash-on-hand to cover its purchase price. Unless we'd already had the winter's first snow (which was unlikely on Cape Cod), the biggest sled must be pulled from its storage corner in the garage, a length of rope (always hard to find) located, and the sharp hatchet retrieved from the woodshed.

Usually both parents participated: Mother to choose a tree just the right size and shape, not spindly at the top, nor lopsided, nor sparse in the middle; and Dad to do the chopping. The youngsters made up the cheering section.

In those days, our Christmas trees came from the fields along the edge of the golf links where houses now stand. Or we took them from abandoned meadows or pasturelands starting to fill in with upland cedars. Trees could be had for the cutting, for whoever owned the land minded not at all having them removed. With more than enough trees for every family to take one, and more growing quickly, there was no better use for them. Any village family wanting a tree was welcome. That's the way it had always been; that's how I thought it would always be.

When I grew up, married, and lived in a big city, mid-December came and went without anyone suggesting we go after a tree. As Christmas week rolled in, I brought it up myself. "Let's go after the Christmas tree."

"How much can we spend for one?" came my husband's question.

"Spend? You're going to BUY a tree?"

"Well, how else will we get one?"

"Why, we just drive out to the country, choose one, chop it down, and bring it home!"

My spouse hooted with laughter. "Are you kidding? There's no place closer than northern Wisconsin where Christmas trees grow. Besides, you can't go on someone else's property and cut down their trees; you'd be arrested!"

We counted out the money to buy our tree. Three dollars. That amount represented one quarter of a week's household expenses, but I couldn't imagine Christmas without a tree.

Why is the tree, pungently fragrant, tinsel and lighted, a symbol of Christmas? Although a familiar sight today, the practice grew slowly in this country. As recently as 1840, a Christmas tree was such a curiosity in America, people paid to see one.

Immigrants from Germany to Pennsylvania introduced Christmas trees to Americans in the eighteenth century. Theirs was a small juniper lighted with tiny tapered candles and decorated with apples, nuts, strings of popcorn and cranberries, and, most important of all, spice cookies.

These cookies were special indeed. Veritable works of art, a few have survived hungry children and can be seen, even now, in museums. The good wives of the Pennsylvania Dutch farmers cherished their cookie cutters and prized, in particular, ones uniquely their own. The result is a remarkably varied selection of styles and designs.

It was in the period of our history that the mythical Uncle Sam became a national symbol of the United States. He, too, became a cookie, and with his arrival among the people of Pennsylvania of German descent, it was clear that America was the accepted homeland of this isolated farming population. Their Christmas cookie spread from the countryside to the city of Philadelphia, and, mobile as The Gingerbread Man, ran to other centers, carried by friend to friend as tasty gifts.

In 1825 *The Saturday Evening Post* published a report of "trees visible through windows, green boughs laden with fruit richer than the golden apples of the Hesperides, or the sparkling diamonds that clustered on branches in the wonderful cave of Aladdin."

"Kriss Kringle's Christmas Tree," a children's book published in Philadelphia in 1845, introduced Santa Claus and Christmas trees to toddlers throughout the land. A tradition was born.

By 1862, decorating Christmas trees was fashionable in San Francisco, California. From its first planting in Pennsylvania, the custom had taken root from coast to coast.

A decade later, William DeMuth, glassmaker, produced the first American-made silvered glass balls in New York City. By 1890 a wealth of tin, wax, cardboard, candy, and glass Christmas tree decorations was available to the Victorian populace, those lovers of any item intricately detailed.

Most American families, however, still relied upon homemade ornaments for decorating their trees. And in typical manner, Americans chose taller and taller trees until the small ones the German people had introduced were overshadowed by trees stretching from floor to ceiling, as some still do today.

Now the pendulum is swinging again toward smaller trees, not because of fashion but for practical reasons. The days are past when most Americans lived in large Victorian houses containing big rooms with ten-to-twelve foot ceilings. In many towns and cities those houses have been torn down to build apartments or condominiums that house many families on the same acreage that once sheltered but one. Open space, land near town centers, grows more valuable year-by-year as our nation grows more populous.

And not only are ceilings lower, but rooms are smaller in living quarters of the latter half of the twentieth century. Small rooms best accommodate small Christmas trees. Popular now are the three-to-four foot table-trees, not dissimilar to the tiny junipers the Pennsylvania Dutch of German extraction introduced to America a hundred and fifty years ago.

Were I to suggest, this week or next, going out for a Christmas tree, that's the size we'd choose. A single string of lights might be adequate for such a tree; two at most. Only a few decorations from the many boxes packed in cartons in the cellar would need to be brought upstairs. And of the lengths of silvery tinsel coiled into shoe boxes, two would be sufficient.

While decorating the tree, I might remember Christmas tree expeditions of 50 years ago, might recall the sharp clear air stinging my nostrils, the ring of the hatchet blade as Father toppled the tree Mother had picked as very best of hundreds we could have chosen, and how we bundled and tied the tree to the long sled and dragged it home. I might remember exactly where the tree stood, each year, in the corner of the living room where its lights were visible from outside, through two windows.

I might remember? How could I possibly forget?