

*Ken Alexander
Remembers ...*

Christmas Trees



Christmas trees these days are set up in many living rooms and decorated and lighted a week or more before Christmas. This may have been the case also in the 1930s and '40s, but in our household and many others, the tree didn't make its debut until Christmas morning.

Our tree was delivered, along with the presents, on Christmas Eve by Santa Claus, and it was Santa who trimmed the tree.

Thus, on Christmas morning, when the children tumbled out of bed and dashed into the parlor to discover what Santa had brought them, they would see the tree, in all its splendor, for the first time. If the tree had already been up for several days, the effect on Christmas morning would have been anticlimactic.

As a matter of fact, as I later learned, it was the man of the house, not Santa Claus, who brought in the tree. He would go out on some pretext on Christmas Eve and return with the tree, which he would hide in the garage or on the back porch or in the basement.

According to legend, my maternal grandfather would announce on Christmas Eve that he was going out to get a haircut. (My grandmother was in on the subterfuge; she knew he was going to buy the tree.)

When Grandpa returned, Grandma would inquire, in the presence of the children, whether the barber had given him a good haircut. (This was her way of asking

whether Grandpa had been successful in buying an attractive tree.)

When Grandpa had answered that yes, the barber had given him a good haircut, Grandma would follow up the question by asking, "Did he bawl some?" (This was her way of asking whether the tree was a balsam. The kids were none the wiser.)

I never had a hand in decorating our tree until I was old enough to realize that the task was performed not by Santa Claus, but by the family.

Before the first ornament was hung, the tree had to be set up, and that was no mean task. (We're talking about a natural tree here; the artificial Christmas tree had yet to be developed.)

In the first place, the tree was found to be a bit too tall for the ceiling. Dad would then go to the basement and return with a handsaw, with which he would lop a few inches of height from the tree — either from the top or from the bottom, depending on the configuration of the branches.

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Next, the stand would have to be adjusted so that the trunk would appear from all directions to be vertical.

After this had been accomplished, we would notice that the branches on one side of the tree were a bit sparse. We couldn't have that side facing into the room. We couldn't have it facing the window, either.

Some amateur tree surgery was indicated. Down to the basement Dad would go again, returning this time with a push drill. He would saw a couple of branches off the full side of the tree, drill a couple of holes in the trunk on the sparse side, and stick the branches into the holes.

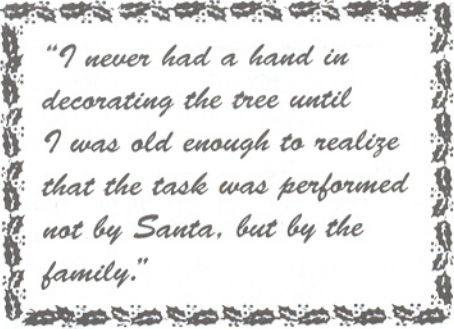
Now that we had a fairly symmetrical tree, the trimming could begin. But first, the butt end of the tree had to be immersed in a vessel of water. (Needles were beginning to fall already.) Some people advocated putting a bit of sugar into the water; others thought an aspirin tablet should be used.

Most of the ornaments in those days were made of very thin, opaque glass, thinner than the glass that light bulbs are made of. Most of the ornaments were of a solid color: crimson, dark blue, dark green, silver, or gold. They were so shiny that you could see your reflection in them.

These iridescent balls come in about three sizes, as I recall; the largest was about four inches in diameter. They were beautiful objects, and, like many things of beauty, they were very fragile. I accidentally broke several of them by dropping them on the floor. The most fragile were the largest ones, which would very likely break even when dropped on a rug.

When one of these ornaments broke, it made a popping sound like that of a light bulb when it breaks. And it didn't just break—it shattered.

Besides the round glass ornaments, we had a few ornaments of celluloid in other shapes: an angel, a swan, a basket, a little house. There were also a couple of bells made of a thin metal, and, of course, a star, which was placed at the top of the tree.



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Some families would make a garland of popcorn threaded on a string, and wind the string around the tree. Children might split a walnut in half, eat the nutmeat, glue the halves of the shell together, paint the shell with a bright water color, and insert a bit of wire for a hanger, thus creating an ornament.

Peppermint candy canes also made attractive ornaments, and they didn't need to have hangers attached.

Some manufacturers called it Angel Hair, some called it Silver Rain, and still others called it Icicles. What it was, was tinsel — long, thin strips of metal foil which many families used to give the tree an added glitter.

There were two ways of applying tinsel to a tree. One could carefully drape each strand over a branch so that it hung straight down, like an icicle. Or, one could stand back a couple of feet and toss the tinsel at the tree, a few pieces at a time, allowing it to land where it might.

The first method lent the tree a neater appearance; the second gave the tree a more casual air, but it took much less time. Each method had its proponents. Which was the proper way? This was the subject of many a running friendly family dispute.

More than anything else, of course, the lights are what give a Christmas tree its warmth and its magical aura.

My parents used to tell of Christmas trees of their childhood, very early in the century, which were adorned with lighted

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candles. What a fire hazard that must have been! I wonder how many tragic fires at Christmastime were caused by a candle igniting a dry tree.

The first Christmas tree lights in my recollection were slightly smaller, and more pointed, than the standard bulbs used today. The lights on each string were connected in series: this meant that the electric current had to flow through each bulb, one after the other. Thus, when the filament in one of the bulbs broke — that is, when one of the bulbs burned out — the continuity would be interrupted, and all the lights on the string would go dark.

Considerable time was spent, during the holidays, replacing burned-out bulbs. The replacement of a bulb took only a few seconds; the time was consumed in determining which of the bulbs had burned out.

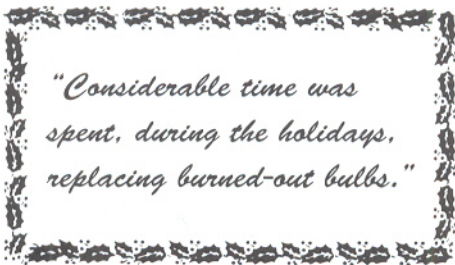
One way was to take a spare bulb which was known to be good, and place it in the first socket of the string that was out. If the string still didn't light, you would know that the bulb you had just replaced was not the dead one. You would then use that bulb to replace the next one on the string. You would keep doing this until the string lit up; then you would discard the last bulb you had replaced — that was the dead one.

This system worked if there was only one burned-out bulb on the string. If there was more than one, you were in trouble.

Sometimes, instead of screwing a bulb into each socket, the man of the house would stick the tip of a small screwdriver into each socket so that it touched both contacts. If the string lit up, he would know that that socket was the one which had held the dead bulb. This method, of course, was dangerous, and was *not* recommended.

Here, too, if there was more than one dead bulb involved, the system wouldn't work.

The best method of locating a burned-out bulb was to remove one of the bulbs



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from a string which was lighted, and use the resulting empty socket to test each of the bulbs in the string that was out.

If there happened to be no spare bulbs on hand, you could wad up a piece of tinsel, place it in the socket, and screw the dead bulb in on top of it. Then, with the exception of the dead bulb, the string would light up. This measure, too, would *not* have been approved by the underwriters.

Some time in the '40 — I believe it was after the war—a revolution occurred in Christmas tree lighting. A new system was introduced in which 110-volt bulbs were used and connected in parallel; that is, each socket had its own pair of wires branching out from the string. Thus, if a bulb burned out, the rest of the bulbs would continue to burn.

Why hadn't somebody thought of that before?

Then came the tiny bulbs which we used to call Italian lights, as many as 35 or 50 on a string. Like the other Christmas tree lights, these came in colors, but sometimes we'll see a tree outdoors festooned with nothing but white ones.

While I was working as an office boy in a downtown office in the late '40s, one day in mid-December the office manager gave me some money from petty cash and sent me out to buy a Christmas tree for the office. I found a lot around Randolph and Jefferson where trees were being sold. There I selected a tree which I thought would be suitable and purchased it for \$1.50.

When I returned to the office with the tree, the staff gathered around to see what I had bought. The boss's secretary asked me how much I had paid for the tree, and I told her.

"You paid a dollar and a half for that?" the secretary shrieked.

The file clerk chimed in: "The guy must've seen you comin', Kenny."

"You call that a tree?" said one of the draftsmen. "That's not a tree. That's a branch."

My feelings were hurt. I had been sent by the office manager to buy a tree, and I had bought one. I had used my best judgment. The price was \$1.50, and I paid \$1.50. I had been hired as an office boy, not as a purchasing agent.

Later, I learned that the office crew had merely been to get a rise out of me. In that, they had succeeded. Just as it was customary to have a Christmas tree in the office, so it was a custom to tease the office boy who had bought the tree.

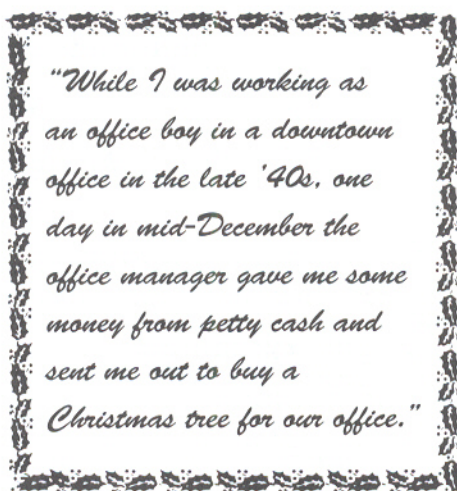
All of us have seen elaborate Christmas displays in front yards. Often, the centerpiece is an evergreen growing on the lawn. For the rest of the year, it's just an evergreen, but in mid-December it becomes a Christmas tree. Enough of these displays, especially on a night when the ground is white with snow, can turn a neighborhood into a magical fairyland.

In the old days, all Christmas trees were natural trees. Nowadays, many of the trees are artificial. You can buy an artificial blue spruce or Norway pine or any kind you want. Although these lack the fragrance of a conifer, they look like the real thing, they don't shed needles, and they needn't be disposed of after New Year's.

Glass ornaments are still sold, but the stores are now also selling ornaments with a satiny finish which are much less fragile than the glass.

The lights, too, have changed. The bulbs are not only a different type from those of the 1930s; they also do more than merely glow. You can buy a string of lights that will dance, chase, fade in and out, or do all those tricks in sequence.

Basically, though, the Christmas trees



of today look pretty much like those of the '30s.

During the holiday season, Christmas trees can be seen everywhere—in offices, in stores, in banks, in barber shops, in lobbies of office buildings, in restaurants. Thousands of families have lunch every year under the great tree in the Walnut Room of Marshall Field's State Street store, no matter how long the wait for a table.

Then there is the tree in Grant Park, and the one on the Daley Center Plaza. The ornaments and lights on these trees may number in the thousands. These are spectacular Christmas trees.

I think that the best of all the Christmas trees is the one in your own home. And I think that the best time to enjoy it is on one of the quiet evenings between Christmas and New Year's. Then, the shopping, the wrapping, the mailing, the baking, the unwrapping, the ooh-ing, the aah-ing, and most of the activities that make the season such a busy time are done with, and you're able to spend some time alone with your thoughts.

On one of these evenings, with carols playing softly, it can be most pleasant to bask in the serene glow of the colored lights as you contemplate the tree, and entertain sweet memories of Christmases long past. ■