

Christmas in Vermont

In a single night, the tree made magic that would last a lifetime.

By Carol A. Glatfelter

I am now 52 years old, and I cannot recall a Christmas when my mother didn't share the story of her childhood and their Christmas tree. The best part of hearing this story wasn't that I expected it every year, like the ritual Christmas carols you hear only during this season. No, it was the look on her face when she recalled it, and the emotions that she displayed with each word she spoke. I listen to her and watch her face as her eyes delve deep into her soul to bring out the event so clearly in her mind.

Life was hard in Williamstown, Vt., and my mother's family was poor. Her father was a hardworking farmer and her mother stayed home to care for their children and their large home. My mother, Theresa Gagnon, was born in 1929, the oldest daughter of 10, which in itself bore many hardships and responsibilities.

Their house was a large structure made small by the large number of people under its roof. My grandfather shared the house with his brothers and their mother, building a wall that separated the individual quarters.

Grandfather and his family occupied a good two-thirds of the house, and his two brothers and mother occupied the other third. The house was crowded even before children came along.

The remaining space held a large kitchen, living room and one small bedroom downstairs; the other bedrooms were upstairs, all jammed with children. Bathrooms didn't come along for quite some time.

charities for the children. Times were hard. But no matter how bad life seemed or how poor they were, they always had a Christmas tree.

My mom would tell of her father hitching the horses to



The author's mother's childhood home in Williamstown, Vt.

The house always seemed full. There was never any space that wasn't occupied by children, especially in winter when the weather was bad. Then the smaller children were forced to remain inside while the older boys worked outside or in the barn with their father.

Christmas rolled around every 12 months whether they were ready for it or not. The family received donations of toys or clothing from local

the oversized sled and bundling up all the children that were old enough to be out in the cold. Then off they would go, up into the woods to cut their Christmas tree. My grandfather owned 340 acres of land, a great deal of it covered in forest, so there were always plenty of trees to choose from.

The girls would remain on the sled while the boys and my grandfather would get their saws and ropes and begin the process

of cutting down the selected tree. That became a part of their holiday tradition each year and the most exciting day of the year for the children.

The large tree was secured to the horse-drawn sled with rope as they headed down the snow-covered mountain toward the warmth of their home.

The horses knew the way, plodding down the hills slowly, one step at a time, sinking knee-deep in white, fluffy snow. They lifted each foot out carefully, high enough to clear the snow before plowing into it again, seemingly ignoring the cold.

On occasion the howling of hungry wolves could be heard in the not-too-far-off distance, causing the smaller children to shrink in fear and snuggle closer to their older siblings. My grandfather made sure he carried an old rifle in the sled, and each of the older boys was skilled in its use. It only made the adventure more exciting to discuss around the dinner table that evening.

Once dinner was finished and the dishes put away, the dining room table was moved to the farthest side of the kitchen and a large sheet was placed in a corner on the floor. Grandfather and the boys slipped outside while the smaller children were ushered out of the way by my mother.

My grandmother would disappear into her closet and pull

out a box with brightly colored decorations made especially for the Christmas tree. There were no brightly colored glass balls or “turn of the century” lights, but handmade red and green paper chains and crocheted white snowflakes. My grandmother would spend a few moments at the stove popping corn; then she gave needles and thread to the younger children to string it. My mother remembers helping them with their needle and thread while trying to complete a popcorn chain of her own.

Once my grandfather and the boys fitted a sturdy wooden stand to the base of the tree, stood it up and made sure it was level, it was time for the grand entrance. The door flew open and the tree came in base-first as the children gasped and stared in awe. The boys carefully placed the tree in an upright position with the guidance of my grandfather, and they positioned it in its annual honorary spot in the house, on the sheet in that kitchen corner.

Grandmother and my mom would carefully place the strung popcorn, starting at the top and winding it around and around, one string at a time, until the popcorn encircled the tree from top to bottom. Grandma handed my mother the delicate snowflakes to hang on the naked

branch tips, and the smaller children draped the red and green paper chain on whatever branches they could reach.

Then, out came the final decoration, some brightly colored metal icicles. Finally, a star was carefully placed on the highest tip of the tree.

By then it was late, but the children were allowed to sit and appreciate the Christmas tree for about an hour before going to bed. Candles were lit and the lights were turned off. The family spoke in whispers—if at all—as they stared at the beautiful Christmas tree that would be taken down the following night, on the evening of Christmas Day.

My mother especially loved her Christmas tree because it was brought into the house late on Christmas Eve and became the center of attention for one single day, oftentimes less than 24 hours. Then life went back to normal until the following Christmas Eve.

These days, she sets up her Christmas tree about two weeks (sometimes more) before Christmas, and she never takes it down until well after the New Year. Sometimes she sits in her home with the lights out and the Christmas tree lights on and just stares in wonder at the beauty of the tree, as she did so many years ago. ❖