Pink Snow Christmas

By Walt Starkey

In the late 1930s, our family moved from Los Angeles to a small desert valley straddling the California-Nevada state line to try our hands at homesteading. Before Los Angeles, our Christmases had been spent in East Texas, Louisiana and Arkansas, where moderate time and effort in a nearby woods would yield bountiful greenery, holly and mistletoe for Christmas decorating, not to mention a handsome Christmas tree.

In comparison, our desert valley offered meager decorative bounties. Tamarack (or "salt cedar") branches were clad in dull green needles and could be substituted for evergreen boughs. There was also a small bush, a cousin of the sagebrush, called "desert holly." Its silver-gray leaves were the exact size and shape of holly leaves and could be fashioned into a striking wreath for the front door. Tamarack and desert holly, however, were all that the desert had to offer.

Walt and Jack Starkey, shown here with their dog, Pal, took pride in the tamarack boughs and pink snow that decorated their house.

On his way back from his job at the Chiquita gold mine, Dad detoured to a town called Goodsprings. When he arrived at home in our Model A, he brought along a small pine tree riding in the rumble seat. Decorating that tree, however, was a challenge.

A five-pointed cardboard star covered with tinfoil would do for the top, but we would have to somehow supplement the few glass ornaments that had survived our latest move. Under our grandmother's direction, my brother and I cut red, green and orange craft paper into 3-inch-long, ½-inch-wide strips. We pasted the ends of each strip together with flour-and-water paste, forming the links of a long, colorful chain, which we admired greatly. Stringing popcorn with needle and thread was less successful, but we disciplined our appetites for the corn enough to let us fashion a couple of acceptable strings.

Setting these things aside, we turned our attention to the effort we were banking on to save the day. The teacher in our one-room schoolhouse had showed us how to vigorously apply an eggbeater to a bowl of soap chips and water to produce mounds of foam with the consistency of whipped cream. When spread generously on the boughs, this foam would yield a Christmas tree that, to all appearances, had just endured a heavy snowstorm.

We had used Ivory soap chips at school, with beautiful results. At home, though, all we had was a bar of harsh, yellow lye soap and a couple of bars of Life Buoy. We settled on Life Buoy shavings.

The consistency of our foam was fine, but it had a pronounced rosy pink color. Exercising our artistic license, we decorated our tree with the pink snow. We were so pleased with the effect that we decided to tack tamarack boughs around the window frames and over the door outside the house and decorate them with soap snow, too.

Over the next couple of days before Christmas, we enjoyed newfound fame, evidenced by the number of visitors who dropped by from the far reaches of the valley to take a look at our pink snow. None of them laughed aloud—at least not within our hearing.

On the other hand, the Christmas of the pink snow furnished our family with many a fond, nostalgic chuckle in the ensuing years. ❖

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