

Greetings!

We hung the Christmas calendar today and started counting down the days until Christmas at the Griffin household. The tree is up, snow covers the grass tonight and we still have 20 days to go. The tree lot was busy despite a heavy wet snow falling on a cold 32-degree day. Thank God for Long Johns!

As I share a few stories with you in the coming weeks of Christmases past, I hope you'll find a warm quiet place, pour yourself some hot chocolate and release some of your own thoughts of Christmases gone by.

Over the years I've had 54 Christmas trees, but only a few stood out as really special. Hopefully, as I share one of them with you today, it will unlock one of your own special Christmas tree memories. Are you ready?

That Glorious Christmas Tree

Sixth grade was a great year. Mrs. Bryson was an incredible teacher, and the Woodville Elementary School, located between Tallahassee and the Gulf of Mexico, had that perfect country setting. The huge limestone walled, single story building sat next to my home church, our church cemetery and a privately owned section of beautiful Florida woods. It was a great place to attend school.

Before political correctness, we celebrated Christmas full throttle. Programs lasted for what seemed weeks on end as each grade, first thru sixth, took their turn using the auditorium. The Christmas story was recited and songs were sung by kids too excited to follow their teachers instructions on cue. Classroom parties were loud as we celebrated beneath decorations made from every imaginable object, and it was our need for more of these materials that took us into the woods on that day.

I, along with two other boys, each named Johnny, were chosen to make the trek to collect pieces of discarded Styrofoam from old flower pots at the cemetery. It was a simple task, twenty minutes tops, given to three capable "young men" of great trustworthiness. As we climbed the back fence of the cemetery and ventured into the private woodlot, there it stood; sunshine filtering through its branches like the star of Bethlehem. It was a magnificent tree! What our classroom really needed wasn't more glitter covered Styrofoam pieces shaped into stars, but a tree; and not just any tree, but a glorious tree!

You'd be surprised how long it takes to cut down an eight foot tree with a three inch Barlow knife that I had purchased at Herring's hardware for \$1.25, but time was irrelevant to us; we were on a mission. With the assistance of a rock, we took turns driving the blade into the trunk until someone yelled, "timberrrrr". We knew Mrs. Bryson would be proud of our find and our classmates would hold us up as heroes. Nothing left now but to drag it from the woods.

Meanwhile, back at school the alarm had gone out. Our principal had gathered a couple of teachers who were on their way to the cemetery, just as we emerged from the woodlot dragging our prize behind us. As the tree lay outside our classroom door, we awaited our fate; overheard was the possibility of a lawsuit from the landowner and a discussion as to what should happen with the tree, and to the three of us. Our principal could swing a mean paddle, but it was Mrs. Bryson's that we feared most.

Somewhere in the middle of their conference, our prayers were answered and grace prevailed. It was decided that possibly not enough instruction had been given and it wasn't totally our fault that we had strayed from the given course. Mrs. Bryson sent someone else to retrieve the Styrofoam while we were assigned make up work for our lost time while in the woods. Somehow, we had managed to avoid her paddle, and that's all that counted.

I only had a minor part in our Christmas program presented to the community, but I had never been as proud as I was on that night. Throughout the evening, Mom watched our skits with a gentle smile; however, it wasn't our program that I was eager for her to see. Standing center stage was the most marvelous Christmas tree ever. Eight feet tall with lighted star, large colored light bulbs and tinsel hanging from every branch, it was a glorious tree indeed! In fact, with the exception of a few Barlow knife marks at its base, it was a perfect tree.

My Final Word

We never heard from the owner of the woodlot, and with the end of Christmas break, the tree quietly disappeared. I can't remember a single gift, mom's dinner, or anything else about that Christmas, but it was a great Christmas!

Christmases are certainly about Jesus more than the holiday event itself, but the events surrounding the season can touch our lives in profound ways. Our early Christmases, as a young married couple, were rather slim financially, but being creative, we made do with the little we could afford. With a trip to TG&Y (A "five and dime" store.), we returned home with colored construction paper, Elmer's glue, glitter and of course Styrofoam of all shapes and sizes. It looked rather pitiful, but it was our very own Christmas tree.

To this day, several of those homemade ornaments are stored along with our shiny store bought ones. This year, I think I'll hang one on our tree; after all, even a Hallmark ornament could never match their sentimental value.



And that's just a Christmas thought . . .

Chris