

Christmas in North Caldwell, New Jersey  
Written by Ralph DeCamp

The center of the little town of North Caldwell consisted of the land and buildings of the Armitage Farm. Mr. Armitage, a wealthy Englishman, had created his dream farm on several hundred acres but died before he could take permanent residence. After his death, the land was subdivided and sold off. The families living there became members of the unofficial "Farm Club."

My family bought land and built our home there in 1950. We moved into a neighborhood remarkable for its closeness. Many individual projects became community projects as the neighbors came by to lend a hand. There was also a lot of community socializing.

The Christmas party season always began with the lighting of the Mueller's Christmas tree. The Muellers had bought land and built their house at the top of the hill that was the highest spot in North Caldwell and may well have been the highest spot in Essex County. The center of the house was the aptly named "great Room with one glass wall commanding a panoramic sweep of the countryside as well as a high cathedral ceiling. At first, they had a large Christmas tree in the Great Room but after a few years, a large outdoor tree - a very large outdoor tree, augmented this. In fact, this tree was nearly the size and sometimes larger than the famous Rockefeller Center tree and when lighted could be seen for miles around.

Getting this tree and setting it up into the yard became an annual neighborhood event that took more than three weeks. The trees were huge Eastern White Pines from a farm about thirty miles away. These trees were from one hundred to one hundred twenty feet on the stump and weighed in the neighborhood of six to seven tons. The logistics and mechanics of cutting a tree this size - gently - rigging it and transporting it were daunting.

The first weekend involved bundling the tree. The tree had to be climbed and the upper branches pulled up to the trunk and tied. Then working downward, each whorl of branches had to be pulled up. The lower branches, themselves tree-sized, had to be pulled up as tightly to the trunk as possible, without breaking them. The bundled tree could be no larger than twelve feet in diameter.

The next weekend involved the cutting and transport, and the most manpower. My father had access to an army surplus 10-ton wrecker with winches and hoists. The top speed of this monster was about 40 MPH so we had to leave at about 4AM to get up to the site. To twelve-year-old me, this was an adventure. My father was, I'm sure, less excited.

Once there, the tree had to be climbed again and rigged to be lowered gently to the ground. This involved chaining the winch cable to the trunk and four 150-foot manila lines off the sides. The base of the trunk was chained to keep the trunk from skidding once the cut was complete. The tree was lowered by the powerful truck winch while the side lines, snubbed around trees to the side, controlled side sway. The sidelines had to be alternately slacked and tightened as the tree was lowered.

Bill Mueller had made a pair of bogey wheels welded to an X-frame with a fifteen-foot tongue to serve as the back wheels. The lowering had to be stopped while this rig was placed and secured.

The top of the tree rested in the frame, while the tongue was chained and spiked to the trunk. Then the tree was lowered the rest of the way.

Once on the ground, the truck was moved to the trunk and the trunk end lifted and chained to the truck body. We now had a trailer, about a hundred feet long and twelve feet wide ready for the trip back home, at about 20 MPH.

The route was carefully planned. Every town we passed through had its own permit for oversize travel. The roads had to be off the main road and the move had to be on Sunday to minimize traffic interference. In addition, there could be no tight turns, no low bridges, and no obstructions. A car carrying "Oversize Load" signs and equipped with flashing lights had to escort the truck, one to the front, the other bringing up the rear. This caravan slowly ground up the road attracting considerable attention from passers-by who, no doubt, wondered who these lunatics were and what we were up to.

By the time we got home it was usually after dark. So the tree was hauled to the position site in the field and dropped for next weekend.

The next Saturday the tree was positioned. It was wired while on the ground with a junction box at the base and another about halfway up. Once again, the winch cable and wire sidelines were secured to the trunk and the 150-foot light strings attached to the top and tested. The trunk end was chained to keep it from skidding away from the six-foot deep socket hole and the winch hoisted the tree up until the trunk slid into the hole.

The guy wires were staked into the ground and adjusted so the tree was straight. Once again the tree had to be climbed and the bundled branches released. Then the light cords were pulled out and wound about the tree and tested . and we were ready for the party.

As I recall, we did this for about eight years. It wasn't all work. We had a large fire for warmth as it was always cold in those open fields, and Janie Mueller had enormous pots of cream of tomato soup and coffee as well as bundles of sandwiches for anyone needing sustenance in addition to a quantity of adult beverages for the older folks.

One year the trunk chain broke as the tree was being lowered, so the tree crashed to the ground. Another year one of the side lines was mishandled giving its controller a pair of badly rope-burned hands. As it happened, I was then about 17 so was an active participant, was controlling the side line opposite. I saw the line slacking too fast, looked up and saw a wall of green moving in my direction very quickly so I dropped the line and skedaddled. My father, controlling the winch and having an overview of the whole operation was sure I would be crushed until he saw me scoot out of the tree line like a rabbit. He told me later that he never realized I could run so fast.

Looking back, I now think that the only reason no one was killed or injured was the 42 guardian angels and the hand of God taking care of fools. It was a lot of fun, though.

The party was never a long affair. Carols were sung, the inside tree, usually a beautiful blue spruce, was already lighted and then that big tree was lit for the first time at night always spectacular. Refreshments featured family recipe eggnog of great richness and, for the adults,

potency, since the recipe involved some eight bottles of various rums and brandies. The four-foot portion of the tree trunk above ground level was burned as a Yule log in the large stone fireplace of the Great Room. That log lasted most of the Christmas season.

The next major event was Christmas Eve at our house. We had a Christmas Eve party for as long as I remember. Family, friends, strays, houseguests, during WWII even a few soldiers and sailors far from their own homes. All were welcome for turkey, smoked turkey, shrimp and other seafood (including my Swedish Grandmother's favorite herring), finger sandwiches, sometimes smoked pheasant and other goodies. In addition to Christmas cookies were pfefferneuse (a spiced nugget dipped in powdered sugar) and Lebkuchen (a spiced cake, more like a fat cookie with a rice-paper bottom) from Germany.

These are only available during the Christmas season and are always packed the same way in the tin. Most have a light icing, and one of these is on top, followed by one coated with dark chocolate, followed by one with four almonds in the shape of a cross, with the rest just light icing. Traditionally, the chocolate one goes to the youngest child, the almond one to the oldest adults. These are always broken into quarters.

In later years my friends and I would go to midnight service at St. Peter's Episcopal church. By then just about everyone had gone home except for the family or guests who would be spending the night with us.

Christmas morning was just family and we always had stollen, a German coffee cake filled with dried fruit. Christmas morning was when the kids and family got their gifts. Christmas Eve gifts were for people who wouldn't be there on Christmas morning.

New Years Eve was an adult-only affair rotated between the four houses large enough to accommodate the group, The Williamson's, The Mueller's, the Walkers and the our house. Our house was actually the smallest, but seemed bigger because of all the windows. This was a formal affair, evening gowns for the ladies, white tie and tails for the gentlemen and usually featured a sit-down dinner of standing rib roast of beef and Yorkshire pudding prepared by my mother.

The final major event of the season was Twelfth Night when the Christmas trees and other greens were burned on the front lawn of the Walker's house.

Woody Walker was also the chief of the volunteer fire department so all was well there, and a pumper-truck was standing by, just in case. This was a spectacular fire since those dry greens went up like fury. It also included the top portion of the Mueller's tree. The trunk portion was cut up for firewood. Bringing the tree down was much less complicated than getting it up. We climbed the tree, lowered the light strings and disconnected the junction boxes on the way down. Then the guys were released and the tree felled with a chain saw.

That big portion was laid as the fire base then everyone's trees were stacked around it and lit by a flare. The farm pond was in front of the fire. If there was enough ice we would have a skating party, if not then we just enjoyed cocoa and doughnuts. Our tractor was a Farmall Cub, the smallest one of the four in the neighborhood, so we would take on the task of scraping the ice with the plow blade. My father did that for years, all through the winter.

As a footnote: Bill Mueller finally decided that while getting that huge tree had been fun, it was really getting to be a hassle, so they satisfied themselves with just the indoor tree. That spring he

got a call from a man who lived about 50 miles away, who asked why he stopped having the tree. The man explained that the living room window in the home faced in just the right way to show the large lighted tree in the background, next to their own indoor tree. The sight of that tree had become a part of their own Christmas and they really missed it. He never knew whose tree it was and it had taken some time to track it down.

Bill explained that it was getting risky and expensive to get an actual tree. The man then asked if he provided the materials, would Bill consider having an artificial tree, essentially a pole with lights? Bill would. The man then said that he was a VP of General Electric and would be sending the materials along in the fall. Bill pretty much forgot about it until a big truck showed up one day, along with a crew. They set up a 100-foot flagpole where the old tree had been, wired and rigged it and showed Bill how to fasten the six rings and the light strings. Then it was just a question of hoisting the rings and lights as though you were hoisting a flag and turning it on. He included crates of the best GE outdoor light strings and enough spare bulbs for a lifetime. So from then on for as long as they owned the house, a hundred-foot tree blazed forth during the Christmas season.