

It's beginning to look a lot like Christmas, everywhere you go!

There's a tree in the Grand Hotel...

Ever wonder what the Christmas tree in the proverbial Grand Hotel looked like? Can you see it now, touching the lobby ceiling, draped with garland and twinkling lights, each evergreen bough laden with sparkling ornaments? And what about that smell, the fresh cool scent of pine or cedar! If you feel as I do, Christmas trees are a ubiquitous symbol of the Holiday Season, bringing joy and beauty to it. But, this has not always been the case.

Historically, Christmas trees have not always had a place at the Christmas "table." Early in our country's history, they were opposed because of their pagan origins, those origins derived from an ancient Roman holiday which honored the god Saturn, and the Druids' celebration of the winter-solstice. But, there are also various legends that support the Christian origins of the Christmas tree. Saint Boniface, the patron saint of Germany, is said to have cut down an oak, which the local pagans worshiped. Once cut down, a fir tree grew out of the oak's roots, which Saint Boniface claimed was a symbol for eternal life through Jesus Christ - the fir tree, evergreen, never dying.

Germany is the country where many of our Christmas traditions originated. 1521 is the year given to mark the earliest date that a pine tree was used and decorated for Christmas in the Alsace region of Germany. It was from this simple beginning that the Christmas tree's popularity grew, first with the European nobility, then spreading to royal courts as far away as Russia.

In 1832, young Queen Victoria wrote in her journal, "After dinner, we then went into the drawing-room near the dining-room....There were two large round tables on which were placed two

trees hung with lights and sugar ornaments. All the presents being placed around the trees..." Numerous American cities with historically large German populations like Windsor Locks, Connecticut and Easton, Pennsylvania claim they were the first in the country to decorate Christmas trees. Regardless of which city was first, or what its origins were, the Christmas tree is now a firmly embedded tradition of the American Holiday Season.

As a child in the late 50s, I remember visiting my great aunt Stella Lavender, who was quite the *grande dame*, always resplendent in hat, gloves, and blue hair. Her house was one of those old rambling affairs, with hallways and rooms added on as her family grew. The house had an entrance hall, which was anchored to the ground by a large, mahogany table. During Christmas, this table was covered with a sparkly-gold table cloth that was covered with another cloth of antique lace. Atop the gold and lace was my Aunt Stella's answer to the



"traditional" Christmas tree. Usually it was a young pine or cedar tree, cut and coiffed into a perfect triangular shape and decorated as only a true *grande dame* of the south would. Over the years, Aunt Stella saved hundreds of those little green-glass water tubes, which came with floral arrangements back in the day. Each tube had a green rubber top, into which you could place a single flower. If the weather had cooperated that year, Aunt Stella could fill each water tube with one lush camellia bloom. She then wired the tube and its flower to her tree with floral wire. Sometimes, a few roses lingered in her garden. Those too graced the tree. Along with the flowers, she hung her best broaches, tied with multi-colored satin ribbons. The colored glass of the broaches sparkled in the amber-ish glow of the old brass-and-stained-glass chandelier that hung above the entrance hall table. My Aunt Stella was promoted to Glory when I was just a child, but the memory of her "southern" Christmas tree is not

one that I'll soon forget.

Another "unforgettable" tree comes to mind when I think of Christmases long past. As a child, did you and your family ever cover your Christmas tree with mock snow? Do you remember what mock snow was made from? In a tradition dating back to the dark days of World War II, mock snow was made from Ivory soap flakes. The flakes, combined with boiling water and whipped-up with an electric mixer, produced a frothy foam. The foam was applied to the boughs of the Christmas tree by hand, allowed to drip down and dry, and then sprinkled with white glitter. *Voila!* Mock snow! Once the soap foam dried, the tree could then be covered with glittering decorations and lights. If you've ever seen a tree covered with mock snow, not only is it a sight to behold, but it smells good too! Imagine a house filled with the smell of cinnamon sticks simmering on the stove, evergreen boughs, and Ivory soap! Yum-yum! For those of you who might consider making mock snow, alas, Procter & Gamble, the producers of Ivory soap, stopped making Ivory soap flakes in 1993. But for the enterprising, a bar of Ivory soap, a knife, and an electric mixer might just do the trick in recreating those long lost soap flakes and the delightful mock snow made from them.



Well, so much for Christmas trees from times past. Here's wishing you and yours... WAIT! WAIT! WAIT! How could a discussion of Christmas trees

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be complete without mentioning what many see as the ultimate symbol of the over-commercialization of the Holiday Season - the aluminum Christmas tree! First manufactured in 1958, these trees maintained their popularity throughout the 60s, the last ones rolling off the assembly line, as it were, in the mid 70s. We had one. Six feet tall it was, complete with shiny aluminum foil branches; each branch ending in an aluminum foil "flower," its center sporting a shiny-red ball. We had not one, but TWO rotating color wheels that sat beneath the tree; their red, yellow, and blue gelled light casting a myriad of colors throughout the tree's metallic branches. For those who might not know, the color wheel was needed because traditional Christmas tree lights could not be hung on an aluminum tree. Aluminum and electricity are not bosom buddies! A short circuit at Christmas is never welcomed!

The demise of the aluminum Christmas tree is attributed to a small, bald-headed boy named Charlie Brown. In the 1965 holiday special, "A Charlie Brown Christmas," Lucy begs beleaguered Charlie Brown to get a "big, shiny aluminum tree...maybe painted pink!" But dear little Charlie, saddened over the commercialization of Christmas, paid no attention to Lucy's badgering and bought a pitiful looking natural tree instead; his scrawny

tree representing the true meaning of Christmas. Incidentally, a rare, 7-foot-tall pink aluminum Christmas tree, like the one referenced by Lucy, recently sold on the internet for \$3,600. Not bad for a tree that originally cost under \$75.00!

Whatever your taste in Christmas trees might be, come the season, put one up! Decorate it in those things that you think best represent your interpretation of the season - camellias, bits of old jewelry, or Shiny Bright Christmas ornaments. You could even gall the neighbors by dragging your old aluminum tree out of the attic and decorating it; its multi-colored tackiness a treat for all who see it! Remember, there should not only be a tree in the Grand Hotel, but one at your house as well. Here's wishing you and your family a memory-filled Christmas and a Happy Holiday!



Please remember to keep our troops in your prayers. May God bless, and keep a song in your heart.



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