

Christmas Tree Hunts are a local family tradition

By Craig F. Eisenbeis, Correspondent

Nearly everyone in Western culture has grown up in the shadow of the Christmas tree. Regardless of a person's background, the Christmas tree is a familiar — and inescapable — symbol of this time of year.

Although tied to the literality of "Christ's Mass," and its celebration of the Christian tradition of the Nativity of Jesus, the actual birth date is not known; and it is generally acknowledged that the date of December 25 was somewhat arbitrarily selected, most likely to conform to preexisting seasonal festivals, most notably the Roman Saturnalia.

Initially, the celebration of the Nativity was not an integral part of the Christian faith at all and was not even observed until hundreds of years after the event. The actual celebration, as a holiday or observance, did not begin until the middle of the fourth century. Christmas trees, as we know them today, did not appear until much, much later.

There is evidence that the Christmas tree had its beginnings in pagan traditions dating back more than a thousand years but was adopted into Christian custom in the 16th or 17th centuries. The Christmas tree tradition is generally considered to have begun in northern Europe, with Germany most often cited as the point of origin. By the mid-19th century, Christmas trees had become common throughout Britain.

With its non-Christian roots, the Christmas tree has occasionally been denounced as a pagan symbol or, at the other extreme, decried as a religious infringement on secular society. Most people, however, tend to regard the Christmas tree more benignly as a suitable and festive way to celebrate the season.

By the time that the first settlers of European descent arrived in Sisters Country, in the latter part of the 19th century, the Christmas tree custom was well established. Back then, obtaining a Christmas tree simply meant going out into the forest, cutting the perfect tree, and bringing it home to decorate. That was traditional then, and it still can be today.

If your idea of a traditional Christmas does not involve an artificial tree or an urban Christmas tree lot, those of us in Sisters Country have a clear alternative. With thousands of acres of National Forest surrounding Sisters, it is easy to make a Christmas tree experience the centerpiece of a memorable outdoor family event. The first step, of course, is to obtain a Christmas tree permit from the National Forest Service or one of the other

outlets where tree-cutting permits are sold.

Christmas tree permits cost \$5 each, and up to five permits are permitted per household. The Northwest's Douglas fir tree is commonly considered the nation's Christmas tree; and, in fact, Northwest Douglas firs are shipped all over the world. Douglas firs are common in many areas near Sisters, as are true fir species such as noble, white, Pacific silver, red, and grand firs.

In the Sisters area, fir trees are most often found at slightly higher elevations outside of town; so the timing of a Christmas tree expedition can become a balancing act as the snow line begins to fall.

Keep in mind that a Forest Service permit is valid only on Forest Service lands, so tree-hunters must be certain that the selected tree is not on private land. If unsure, it is a good idea to have a Forest Service map that clearly shows forest boundaries. Trees selected for cutting must be at least 150 feet from state highways, picnic areas, campgrounds, or other developed sites. Trees within 300 feet of streams and lakes are also off-limits.

Other guidelines include selecting a tree that is no more than 12 feet tall. Trees taller than 12 feet require a special permit. The tree to be cut must also be within 15 feet of another tree; so, if the tree is standing alone in an open space, find another tree.

Complete copies of Christmas tree-hunting guidelines and regulations can be obtained wherever tree permits are sold. Forest Service personnel will also provide guidance on areas where cutting is permitted and where to find particular tree species. The Sisters Ranger District office is located at the corner of Highway 20 and North Pine Street, on the west side of town. For further information call 541-549-7700.

In addition to the Forest Service office, tree permits are also available at Sisters Ace Hardware, Bi-Mart, Sisters Mainline Station, Sisters Rental, the Camp Sherman Store, Blazin Saddles and FivePine.

If you happen to be a fourth-grader — or know one — a tree permit can be obtained at no cost. This free tree program is an extension of the "Every Kid in a Park" (EKIP) initiative sponsored by the White House. EKIP entitles fourth-graders to a free National Park pass and a free tree from a National Forest. To claim a free Christmas tree permit for your fourth grader, first obtain an EKIP pass by logging on to www.everykidinapark.gov then take the pass to a Forest Service office. The goal of EKIP is to promote young people's connections with nature and the outdoors.

Finally, be sure that your Christmas tree hunt is a safe one; so, be sure you are properly equipped. Children often have a tendency to wander off, so keep a close eye on children while in the woods. If you travel any significant distance from your vehicle, you should be prepared for outdoor winter travel; and remember that winter weather conditions can change rapidly. Also, it is always a good idea to let someone know where you are going; and carry appropriate emergency supplies.



PHOTO BY CRAIG F. EISENBEIS

Local Christmas tree hunters show off their prize. A Forest Service tree permit can be free for fourth graders, such as the youngster pictured here.

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