

# Christmas tree hunting is a Sisters Country tradition

— By Craig F. Eisenbeis —

For most of us, last year's Christmas season was a significantly subdued one due to the shadow cast by COVID-19. To our continuing dismay, the virus is still with us; but, thanks to vaccines and the resultant declining infections, there is some cautious optimism that the worst may be behind us. As a result, many of us are starting to look at ways to resume some sense of normalcy in our lives; and, for our family, the annual Christmas tree hunt was a step in that direction!

A group activity in the great outdoors, such as a Christmas tree hunt — particularly among vaccinated participants — can be an ideal way to help get our lives back on track after months of limited activities restricted by the pandemic. So, with a houseful of vaccinated family members for the long Thanksgiving weekend, we resumed our annual family tradition of heading into the forest on the Friday after Thanksgiving for a Christmas tree hunt.

The origins of the Christmas tree are invariably traced to the Germanic countries of northern Europe; but there is evidence that the Christmas tree had its beginnings in pagan traditions dating back more than a thousand years. According to the National Christmas Tree Association, the first actual historical record of a Christmas tree dates to 1510 in Latvia. By the sixteenth or seventeenth centuries, the holiday tree concept had insinuated itself into Christian custom; and, by the mid-nineteenth century, Christmas trees had also become common throughout Britain.

By the time that the first settlers of European descent arrived in Sisters Country, in the latter part of the nineteenth 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.

There have been recent news stories about a Christmas tree shortage spurred by such factors as wildfires, water shortages, and pandemic labor shortfalls, which have caused skyrocketing prices — even here in Oregon, which is, by far, the nation's largest producer of commercial Christmas trees, doubling the production of our nearest rival, North Carolina.

Even locally, some commercial tree

outlets have seen prices as high as \$70 for a four-foot tree. However, here in Sisters Country, we are surrounded by thousands of potential Christmas trees right here in our local forests, each with a top price of only five dollars! Every year, the U.S. Forest Service hosts thousands of private Christmas tree hunters; so, there is no better way to obtain your Christmas tree than by having a safe hunt for a wild tree in the great outdoors.

Our traditional tree hunt last week encountered rather atypical conditions. There was no snow whatsoever, in our traditional hunting grounds. So, if you have a hankering for a hard-to-get noble fir that typically grows at higher elevations, this could be the time, as some of the higher elevations are still snow-free this year. With no snow and temperatures in the 50s, we also ended up with a post-expedition surplus of hot chocolate and marshmallows!

The first step, of course, is to obtain a Forest Service Christmas tree permit. Unlike last year, when the local Sisters Ranger District office was not open for permit sales due to COVID, this year an outdoor service window has been added for the purchase of permits. The office is located at the corner of Cascade and North Pine Street in Sisters. Permits may also be purchased online at <https://www.recreation.gov/tree-permits/> or at one of several commercial outlets, including Sisters Ace Hardware, Bi-Mart, Sisters Mainline (Chevron) Station, Sisters Rental, and the Camp Sherman Store.

The permits currently on sale feature the new peel-off stick-on style; so, say good bye to the plastic zip ties and date-punch permits of the past. Fourth graders are eligible for a free tree permit under the Every Kid Outdoors program. Visit the above website for details.

Jean Nelson-Dean, public affairs officer for Deschutes National Forest is among the legions of wild tree aficionados who look forward to the annual tree hunt. "For years I have joined friends in the annual hunt for a Christmas tree on the Deschutes National Forest," she said. "We always make it a special outing with snacks, hot chocolate, and some sledding if possible. In addition to all the fun, it is great knowing that if anyone of us gets stuck, we are not alone."

Up to five of the \$5 permits are permitted

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