

PLEASANTON EXPRESS

2013-12-18 / Living

The search for a perfect tree



Sunny Stephens, Ph.D.

Poteet

It was December of my senior year in high school. My sister, Becky, was a little younger. We thought that it would be fun to cut a live Christmas tree instead of purchasing one. It would also be less expensive actually FREE- a real plus in those days of meager family resources. On a Saturday near Christmas, we advised our mother of our intention to find a nice cedar tree from the thousands that could be seen from the highway at Cedar Gap south of Abilene. We would bring it home and decorate it with homemade ornaments. Since she did not dissuade us, we assumed that we had permission. In retrospect, she probably just did not take our outrageous plan seriously.

Our first hurdle was the fact that we had no car to drive to Cedar Gap. That was actually not a problem for two resourceful teenage girls in 1960. We enlisted the help of two teenage boys with a car. The boys were brothers. Although both are now deceased, out of respect for the memory of their parents, also deceased, their identity will remain anonymous. Their dad was a prominent man of God, a preacher of the Gospel. He would never have approved of his sons and their female accomplices stealing anything, even a tree, from someone's private property! In our sheltered youth, and in a much less complicated time, we honestly did not comprehend the fact that the massive cedar-covered acreage in that area was not the property of EVERYONE. After all, there was no house on it! Just a few cows.

The boys did, indeed, have a car. It was a purple Willys. The driver's side door handle was inoperable so the door was tied shut with a length of fabric. Therefore, both the driver and the passengers had to enter and exit the vehicle from the passenger side. But it ran. That was good enough for us and not too far removed from the transportation of other teenagers at the time. A hand saw and a small hatchet from the garage were all the tools we needed to cut down a tree and we were off to find the perfect one!

We drove to a large cedar covered area south of town and parked the car on the right-of-way. The barbed wire fence that protected the property and the livestock from the highway was little deterrent for kids on a mission! We were through the fence and up on the hill in no time, oblivious to the fact that the fence might actually have been there for a reason.

A field covered with cedar trees looks very differently from the highway than when viewed up close. From the highway, all the trees look like big triangles, full of perfect branches on which to hang ornaments, tinsel, and garlands, with the perfect point at the top for a star. Finding a perfect Christmas tree was not that easy. To our absolute shock, none of the trees looked much like a Christmas tree. Many had crooked trunks unable to balance in a tree stand, most had limbs missing, and none had the perfect shape of a Christmas tree.

After exhaustive searching, we finally cut a shaggy specimen, dragged it back through the fence, and stuffed it into the trunk of the Willys. It was about five feet tall, had a mostly straight trunk, a few scrawny limbs, and only part of one side had been eaten away by the cows. It was surely the most miserable looking Christmas tree ever seen in the history of the universe! But it was FREE! According to AARP, a small tree from a Christmas tree lot would have cost about \$3.00 in the early '60's.

Several trips to the dime store later for ornaments to cover its imperfections, our tree was the focal point of the living room, with its naked side hidden against the wall. The ornaments had cost far more than a tree from the lot, but the experience was priceless, although never repeated! NOTE: WHEN I started writing this, I categorized it as Humorous, as our family has laughed about that Christmas and that ugly tree for more than half a century. I suppose it still is. But as I continued working on it (all of it is true, incidentally) I felt so nostalgic that it was almost serious!