

# *The Trailing Edge*

November 2024

## **The History of My Christmas Tree**

Ever wonder how an object that might seem insignificant to someone else or a mere trifle can build up so much emotional capital? We all have one or more such objects. One of mine is a simple two foot tall artificial Christmas tree.

### **Christmas Trees Growing Up**

As a kid, a big part of the Christmas decorations was the Christmas tree. Sure, there were other decorations, like the holiday candles and the lights along the roofline, but the tree was big and visible. It was also the center of the site for all of those mysterious presents. In my early years, I remember our family going out to the Christmas tree lot to buy a real Christmas tree. My parents preferred the Douglas Fir, because they were afraid the Scotch Pine would set off someone's allergic reactions. At least one year we had little choice but to buy a Scotch Pine, and I don't remember any problems. I learned that the skinny tree you bought at the tree lot would spread out into a big, wide tree as the branches were weighed down with ornaments. I wondered about why someone would want a white Christmas tree (it was flocked to look like it had snow all over it). I remember seeing shiny aluminum Christmas trees in stores, until they were called out as a symbol of the commercialization of Christmas in 1965's *A Charlie Brown Christmas*, after which they rapidly disappeared. I also learned that regardless of how well you watered a cut real Christmas tree (we put sugar in the water which I was told was supposed to help), by the time Epiphany rolled around, the tree would have dried out and the needles would be falling off and filling up the carpet. Then the tree would go on to its next life as landfill fodder, although some places were clever, such as Corpus Christi TX collecting the trees and using them to stabilize the beaches.

Eventually my parents would decide to skip the hassle and get an artificial tree. While many artificial trees are available today that look surprisingly realistic from 10 feet away, this was the day when artificial trees looked like a giant collection of green bottle brushes. Even so, it solved the many problems of the real tree (recurring expense, watering, drying out, dropping needles all over the floor) and replaced them with the problem of where do we store it eleven months of the year?

During my teenage years, Mom lost interest in decorating the tree. Just like with her Christmas Tree cookies, she told me that if I wanted it then I could do myself. So I did. (I baked the cookies for myself too, and still do today.) The first thing to do was to put on the lights. The first lights I remember using on the tree were the C7 incandescent bulbs. These weren't as big as the C9 bulbs we used outside on the house, but on the scale of the tree they were still quite large. While they were colorful, they sure ran very hot. Later we would replace them with the tiny incandescent bulbs (the cylinders about 1/4 inch in diameter) that would flash. I wasn't a big fan of the flashing, but Mom really liked it.

The early decorations that we used were blue, red, and silver glass balls, about three inches in diameter. These balls had always existed, so I suspect they were older than me. We also wrapped the tree in a paper chain that I think my brother started making (possibly as a school project) and I added on to it. Finally, there was the tinsel garland (blue, because Mom liked blue) that wrapped around the tree.

Through the years, unique ornaments were added to the "box o' balls" ornaments.

### **The Academy Years**

In 1979 I graduated High School and it was off to the USAF Academy. As Christmas approached, there was a great desire to have a small reminder of the Christmas season to offset the continual stress of being a freshman at a military academy. The cadet room regulations allowed for some decorations, including a small artificial tree, probably no more than three feet in height. During Parents' Weekend (Labor Day Weekend), Mom and Dad had taken me up North to visit Dad's cousin Roberta who lived in Boulder CO. In early December, right after Thanksgiving, I was finally able to board a (Greyhound type) bus for the trip up to Boulder. Roberta picked me up and took me to her house. Since as a freshman I wasn't allowed to have a car, I hadn't arranged to go to town to buy any Christmas decorations. I thought maybe I could get something while I was in Boulder. Roberta's daughter walked with me to downtown (it wasn't that far). Along the way, she asked me if I wanted to see the Mork and Mindy house, which was featured in the opening credits of the popular sitcom that was running at the time. The house in the credits was an

actual house in Boulder, but it was never actually used for filming any part of the show other than the opening. I saw the house, but I didn't really recognize it, since I hadn't seen any TV for a while.

She took me to some store where I bought a two-foot artificial Christmas tree of the bottle brush variety. It was much too small for three inch glass balls like I grew up with, which weren't available anyway. I bought some thread covered balls, some about one inch in diameter and others about 1/2 inch in diameter. I also bought one string of gold colored tinsel garland. I bought a string of lights to put up in the window, but none for the tree.



**Subject tree, 2024**

When I got back to the Academy, I set the tree on top of a shelf in my room. It was the perfect size for the space available. I decorated the tree with the balls and tinsel.

After returning to the Academy after my Christmas leave, I removed the decorations from the tree and put it away in storage. Each subsequent year through Christmas of 1982, I pulled the tree out and redecorated it. It was nice to feel the change of season as signified by pulling the tree out, especially as final exams loomed on the horizon.

I had only expected to use this tree for the four years at the Academy because it was the limit of what I was allowed. In Grad School, I expected to spend Christmas at Mom and Dad's house, so there seemed no reason to have

a big tree, even though it was allowable now. Also, there seemed no reason to have a large tree when I lived alone in the apartment. However, I still had my small tree from the Academy that took almost no effort to set up. I had built a large set of shelves for my stereo components, speakers, and TV. After Thanksgiving, I pulled out my little tree and placed it on top of the record turntable on the top center shelf. The emotional effect was exactly the same as it had been for the last four years.

After Grad School I moved to Florida at Eglin AFB. For the first Christmas there, I was already engaged but still living alone. For all the same reasons, I pulled out the same tree and placed it in the same place on the turntable.

In 1986, my first wife was very much into having a big Christmas tree, and she wanted a real tree. On Thanksgiving evening, she was very anxious to get started on our first tree together. It was after dark when we headed to a tree lot only a mile or two from our house. It had been raining hard all day, and driving through the field to the lot, I drove our brand new 1986 Ford Taurus into what I thought was a puddle that was a couple of inches deep, but it was more like a couple of feet deep. As water came up over the hood, I wasn't singing "Yellow Submarine", but rather I was wondering if the water was going to get into the engine air inlet and leave the car dead in the middle of a makeshift pond. Fortunately, it didn't. After that scare, she promised that she would never insist on getting a tree that early anymore. As a compromise, our annual "Black Friday" activity was to go get a real Christmas tree.

By this time, my two foot tree was such a tradition for me, having been my Christmas decoration for seven years, that I still pulled it out and placed it on the turntable at top of the stereo shelves.

So it continued for many years. Somewhere along the line, I realized there was no reason to undecorate the tree. At the end of the season, I just picked it up and put it in storage without removing any of the decorations.

After my first wife and I separated in 2010, I was happy to just set up my two foot tree, which gave me comfort because it had always been there for me.

My wife Tuki had no interest in having a real tree, since she said it set off her allergies. Thus, for several years, we just had the little tree. By this time the original tinsel had disintegrated and been removed. Tuki had some red and silver tinsel from somewhere which she added to the tree. The original balls were there, a little worse for wear. In all these years, the tree had never been lighted.

In November 2011, we went to Knott's Berry Farm. In celebration of Veterans Day, all veterans got in for free. While looking around the shops for Christmas themed Peanuts stuff, we found a battery powered string of LED lights with lenses shaped like Snoopy. It was only a couple of feet long, but it was just right for the little tree. As the years passed, the little tree gathered some more ornaments, including the special annual Peanuts ornaments from the Charles M. Schulz museum.

In 2014, Tuki decided that we should go big, so we bought a "normal" 6-foot artificial tree and set it up. The stereo shelves were gone because the stereo they were built for had given up the ghost and been replaced. As per what was now a well-established tradition, the little tree still came out and found a new home on a table.

In the 10 years since, the big tree has only come out twice. The first time we brought it out after Emmy was born, the lowest ornaments on the tree were at least 2.5 feet off ground so a crawling Emmy couldn't get to them. The other time we got it out, Emmy was now old enough to help decorate the tree. Generally, the big tree doesn't come out, because with half of available living space designated as the day care area, the rest of the space was filled with Emmy's toys, leaving no suitable location for a big Christmas tree. Even so, the little tree always comes out, now placed on top of a shelf just to the left of the big TV.

Around 2022, the battery box of the Snoopy lights had corroded, and the light string was rendered unserviceable, even after attempts to restore it. I searched the Internet, like you do, and found a near identical replacement. Thus the Snoopy lights remain. Since they are battery powered, they aren't always on, but when they are, they are a fun addition to the tree.

I don't know if anybody else cares, but this little tree has become quite special to me. This year (2024) marks the 46<sup>th</sup> time that this little tree has been on display for Christmas. The tree is still in good condition, though I can't say the same for the original ball ornaments. There are few objects that have been with me for that long. It's crazy to think that a random decoration bought from an unremembered store in Boulder CO to fill a short term need is still around, reminding me of good memories from all of that time. I expect it to continue being around for at least as long as I am.

**- Russ Erb**