

Christmas Tree Lights

Electronic mail message from Jon Ingenthron, Davis, California

I enjoyed Homer Rudolf's Christmas message, especially the part about a Christmas tree illuminated with candles. My mother, who would have been in her 90's by now, occasionally recounted her childhood memories of a candle-lit tree and how the experience differed from what we have today.

Today, it is not uncommon for electric tree lights to stay illuminated throughout an entire day or night and basically be taken for granted as we busy ourselves with the chores of the moment as the tree glimmers in the background and becomes an afterthought.

In her German-American childhood home, mom explained that lighting the tree candles was a special event reserved for specific times during the holidays. I'm sure there were variations of the process but one I recall was that all the kids would be called to the dining room to sit and wait with intense expectation until their father would finish lighting the candles on the tree in the living room. They were well aware of the danger. When called, everyone would quietly walk into the living room, sit down and stare in wonderment at the flames, shadows, reflections, the tree and gifts. "Kind of like going to church" at least for the first few minutes, with everyone absorbed by the season, the sights, their family together.

Unlike like electric tree lights that stay on forever, watching candles burn is like watching a sunset. If you are to take it all in, you can't look away. Everyone was focused in the moment, straining to remember every detail knowing that it will be "too soon gone" and a year until the next one. Mom was right, those precious moments for her were never forgotten.

So, one Christmas in the late '70s, when Grandma was still with us, I decided to go for it. I set up our family tree, fully decorated and lit with three or four dozen candles. I was very impressed especially at night with the room completely dark. Mom was very quiet with memories I'll never know. Everyone else was curious for a moment but clearly without wonderment.

Side Note: The special slow burning candles and silver clip-on holders are still available in many catalogs. Trees of yore were fresh cut, very heavy with water and not eager to burn. One species, can't recall the name, grows in the classic pyramid shape with widely spaced strong branches that allow every candle to be positioned so that no other branch is above it. I found such a tree, a fire extinguisher, a bucket of water, a tripod for the camera, closed the windows and turned off the heater to eliminate any breeze. The candles actually burned about 40 minutes so we were able to light the tree a few times, ho hum. Actually, the most excitement occurred when friends and neighbors came to visit, saw the partially burned candle stubs and struggled to comprehend what they missed. Now they had a story to tell. And, so do.