The Very Best Christmas Tree — Ever

Thirty dollars a month! In May of 1939 my mother decided that thirty dollars a month, from Dad's meagre earnings, was too much to pay for the small ramshackle cottage, in Sudbury, Ontario, that was home to our family of six. Mom and Dad had learned from friends that a small cottage would soon be available in the village of Minnow Lake just outside the city. With Dad completing the work on the two, twenty feet square, three-room dwellings, Doc Carmichael would only charge us twenty dollars a month rent for one of them, when he did charge.

The deal was completed; we moved to Minnow Lake in July and I learned that our new home, which wouldn't be ready for a couple of weeks, was on a camping lot. The two small cottages were, however, set apart from the one-room log cabins. Our friends, the Griffins, already were in the other cottage.

Minnow Lake was a couple hundred yards down the pathway from our home to be, and across the road. It was a beautiful, clear lake with a sandy beach and would provide us with many hours of recreation. Behind the house was the northern bush and the hill where we picked blueberries in the summer and skied and toboganned in the winter; and which we called Blueberry Hill.

Our new frame home was spartan. There was no running water and the privy was outside, 40 feet from the house. A long walk in winter. Our drinking water was carried from a natural spring the other side of the camping lot. We were too far from the highway for electric service and neither the milk man nor the ice man visited us. Coal oil lamps provided our light in the dark evenings. But it was to be our home for the next four years. Those years were to be among the most memorable of my life.

Summer passed quickly in our new environment and going to a new school and making new friends consumed the fall. With December came thoughts of Christmas, together with snow and cold weather. The only insulation in our home was the snow we banked around the outside of the house to keep the drafts out. The kitchen wood stove provided heat while Jack Frost painted wonderful winter forests and lacey ferns on our two windows.

Each of us had written letters to Santa Claus in care of the T. Eaton Company and had received our replies and fold-up scenes. Of course, Lorna, Jim and I knew that Santa Claus would only be coming to Patsy this Christmas but we wrote to get the reply and a chance to dream. A Christmas Concert was held at school and another at Saint Lukes and we all joined in, portraying our parts in the story pageant and joyfully singing out of tune. Then came that very important day!

There wasn't a lot of money to be spent on Christmas and we kids had convinced Dad that we did not have to buy a Christmas Tree as we could go into the woods and cut one down. We had already made many ventures of discovery into the woods and knew our way around, especially along the moonlight trail. However, our trips had not been in knee-deep snow and Mom and Dad were a bit reluctant to give us permission. Eventually, Lorna - 12, Jim - 8 and I - 10 were allowed to go; Patsy - 6 had to stay home.

The Saturday morning before Christmas, Mom got us ready for our adventure; Dad was at work. Lorna with her snow pants, jacket, boots and ear muffs and Jim and I in our britches, high top boots, mackinaw jackets and leather helmets with ear flaps pulled down, were ready to go. But not until we put on our knitted woollen scarves and were instructed to pull them up over our faces if the wind started to blow. Off we went, taking turns carrying the heavy wood axe, with only one thought in mind. That was, to bring home the very best Christmas tree.

Through the snow we trudged down to the road and up the hill past the Pickels' home and out the moonlight trail to where the flat land was. On our way we examined every tree we saw. Juniper was plentiful but it didn't look like a Christmas tree, nor did cedar. Jack pine didn't have enough branches. Spruce was the only tree we wanted but it had to be big enough and perfectly formed.

The snow was deep but it didn't deter us. Even though it got down our boots and wetted our socks. We passed by many trees but, to our perceptive eyes, all had faults. We had secretly planned this trip for a long time and had a very clear vision of our Christmas tree and nothing else would satisfy us. No, that one is too short; this one has two trunks; that one has branches in the wrong places; this one is too brown, and that one isn't bushy enough.

We walked for about an hour and looked at dozens of trees. The cold was beginning to get to us and we were getting annoyed with each others demands. Then we spotted the tree! We knew instantly that it was our tree. Perfectly formed, it stood tall and stately, its green branches covered with a dusting of snow. Ours now was the task to cut it close to the ground so it would be big enough for our living room. Chopping it down was not an easy job with a dull wood axe; but, we took turns and it finally fell gently on the snow.

We knew it not, but the greatest task still faced us. We had to get it home. It's not easy for small children to drag a big tree through knee-deep snow but we were not about to give up. Only two of us could pull the tree at one time, so we took turns and the other carried the axe. The return trip was much slower and we got tired. There was some grumbling and complaining but our desire to arrive home with the best tree gave us the energy and spirit to carry on.

And we made it! We did not realize how long we had been gone, over three hours, and Mom was a bit worried and let us know it. But she thought our Christmas tree was beautiful. We wanted to take it in the house right away but Mom made us wait until Dad got home as he had to nail the stand to it. When Dad arrived, we sadly watched as he cut two feet off the bottom of the tree so it would fit in the living room. We were so proud to see it standing.

On Sunday, the decorations that came from Toronto with us in 1936, so lovingly stored from year to year, were brought out. We took turns decorating the tree with coloured glass balls, lead icicles, beaded ornaments, golden tinsel and the three treasured birds with their silken-like tails made of spun glass. The paper decorations made at school were carefully placed on the tree and the string of lights, sans electricity, wound about the branches. Then Dad crowned the tree with the sparkling tinsel star. At last, there it was, our tree, a symbol of devotion and a loving family — The very best Christmas tree, ever!

PS Lorna still has one of the birds. Tom Moore