

**THE FIGHT BEFORE CHRISTMAS**  
(published as Christmas spirit lessens tree fight)

*Marsha Henry Goff*

Many families have treasured traditions that ring in the holiday season. At our house, the Christmas season doesn't officially begin until Ray and I have our annual fight about the Christmas tree. Ray's ideal tree is a giant sequoia trimmed with a couple million flashing lights, while I am satisfied with any tree taller than myself trimmed with crayon-colored decorations (more paste than paper) that the kids made in grade school.

When it comes to Christmas trees, Ray and I are in agreement on two things: it has to be real—no artificial trees for us—and we have to go out to the country and cut it ourselves. When we were newly married and practicing the economy necessitated by poverty, we always procured a free cedar tree from Ray's parents' farm. This procurement was not without its hazards. Ray was once stung in the posterior by nearly spent shotgun pellets fired by hunters. To their "we thought you were a rabbit!" apology, Ray angrily pointed to the white sweatshirt hood covering his head and yelled, "If you ever see a rabbit with a tail this big, I want to see it!"

One of our prettiest trees was a cedar that turned out to be Siamese-twin cedars grown together. As Ray sawed away at the trunk, the trees separated. I immediately saw the benefits of half-a-tree. "We can put it flat against the wall and it won't stick out so far into the living room." But Ray wired the trees back together because his Christmas trees not only need to be tall, they must be fat, too.

That fat requirement was never so evident as it was last Christmas, the first in our new home. Our dining room with its 15-foot tower ceiling was specifically designed for a tall tree. Unfortunately, tall trees usually have a wide girth and that is why our dining table was nudged into the living room by last year's tree.

My friend Jean usually chooses her family's tree solo so her fight with her husband generally occurs when they set it up. "It's leaning to the left," she told him last year as he struggled to get the trunk screwed into the tree-holder. "It's straight enough for me!" he shot back. "Well, in that case, I'd rather not have a tree," she threatened, "just get it out of here!"

But our typical tree fight begins as we walk through the first of many Christmas tree farms we'll visit in search of the perfect tree. Ray invariably spots the tallest tree and heads right for it. "How about this one?" he asks. "It's too tall," I say. "No, it's not," he argues. I go to stand beside the tree which dwarfs me. "Look, Ray, this tree is at least three times taller than I am!" "That's okay, I'll just trim off a few of the lower branches."

I usually lose these battles, but last year I put my foot down and insisted we keep looking. After our third pedestrian circuit of the farm, the proprietor took pity and hauled

us around on a tractor-pulled hay wagon. On our fourth wagon circuit, I saw a wonderful tree. “There’s a tall one that’s slender!” I said excitedly. “Well,” said Ray sarcastically, “if I knew what you wanted was a *stick* . . .” “Don’t start with me,” I said, “I’m freezing. My nose is cold and I stopped feeling my toes an hour ago. Let’s just forget about a tree this year!”

After that exchange, the proprietor quickly drove to a shed where he gave us hot spiced cider from his own private stock. Several cups later, I was warmed up, feeling mellow and ready to continue our search. Back in the field, I happily agreed with Ray that the biggest, fattest tree was exactly what we needed.

As our huge tree was netted, I asked the proprietor for the recipe for his spiced cider which I declared was the best I ever tasted. “What’s your secret ingredient?” I asked. “Oh, you must mean the grain alcohol,” he said.

This year, I’m optimistic that Ray and I may be able to avoid a fight altogether when we go tree-hunting. All we have to do is take along a thermos of Christmas spirit.