



# Christmas Tree Delight

By Sherry E Engler

As Christmas is quickly, **QUICKLY**, approaching, I can not help but reflect on the splendid, treasured memories we have as a family cutting our Christmas tree in Tonto National Forest year after year. Of all the treasured memories of Rim Country, these are perhaps my favorite.

When our daughter and son were small, every September we would watch for the newspaper article declaring Christmas tree permits were for sale for a limited time, applications to be picked up at Tonto National Forest Ranger Station, and then mailed to Phoenix for consideration. We would get our permit application, fill it out, attach the fee monies (currently \$15.00) and wait. For our kids, it seemed like a lifetime; every day they would eagerly check the letters in the mail, waiting for the precious bright orange tag for our Christmas tree. And usually near the end of October, the precious tag would be delivered. Their tiny faces, lit up with great smiles and happy anticipation, were cherished gifts in themselves.

Now mind you, Christmas tree cutting wasn't always a smooth adventure. There was the "Fussy" year, where no one, absolutely no one, would or could agree on the beauty of a tree.

"No! No! No! That one has a hole on this side!"

"That one is too small!"

"That one is too big!"

"That one looks orange!" **ORANGE?** Really?

Then there was the snowy, icy year. We received our permit; the cutting area was on top of the Mogollon Rim, right off Highway 260. As we reached the higher elevation from Payson, the snow started to fly to the kids delight. But as we turned on Forest Service Road 300, the slick and snowy weather had impacted several vehicles, most without four-wheel drive. Don, my husband, spent most of the morning helping stranded motorists since we were in a four-wheel drive truck. We were very thankful to get our tree and get home before inches upon inches fell on top of the evergreens of The Rim.

But perhaps my favorite recollection of Christmas Tree cutting was the year we took horses and hauled our Christmas Tree back to our truck using horse power (literally). This year, a light snow had fallen. The kids were in a great mood; the horses were in a great mood, and it just felt like the Spirit of Christmas surrounded us in the boundless forest, abundant with beautiful tree choices. And boy, did we pick a beauty! Because there are regulations on height, ten feet, we found one about that high. But, height regulations didn't stop us. We had horses. We planned to get a tree ten feet high but a round, thick, **BIG** tree. And our choice was perhaps the roundest pine tree I have ever **EVER** seen!!

The horses looked at us very doubtful, when we strapped it behind them. Don kept repeating over and over, "It sure looks **BIG!** You guys sure this is the one?"

"Absolutely!" we replied.

Somehow, the decision seemed wise in the forest, but then we had to lift it on the truck. WOW! Major workout! We heard squeals of laughter as we hoisted the tree time and time again without success. The horses looked at us with knowing eyes. But finally, we were successful. We had to use two ropes instead of one to tie it securely to the truck. But, no worries! We did it!

Somehow, the decision seemed wise in the forest, but when we got home, we couldn't figure out how to fit it through the door. Now that's a BIG tree! We had to tie the limbs down and all of us push with all our might. Have you ever tried to push a plump pine tree through a little bitty door with two kids laughing hysterically behind you? But we made it. A little damage to the tree and door frame; but no worries! We did it!

Somehow, the decision seemed wise in the forest, but how do you decorate such a wide tree? We had to station each other to weave the lights in and out of the branches as if in an assembly line to get the fragrant pine lit up for Christmas. Using ladders, step stools, whatever would reach, we hung ornaments on the limbs easiest to reach because after hours of hanging ornaments we opted for hot chocolate instead of decorating.

Somehow, the decision seemed wise in the forest, but we could barely see each other over the Christmas tree in the living room. We would have to peer on the other side of the tree and yell, "What did you say? Okay, give me a minute and let me make my way around the tree to your side."

The kids would laugh and laugh. "What a BIG tree," they would giggle.

Rim Country has blessed us richly with these wonderful, cherished memories. It may be too late to do so this year but if you and your family would like to participate in cutting a Christmas tree, please visit your local forest service office or visit [www.fs.fed.us/r3/tonto](http://www.fs.fed.us/r3/tonto) for information.

Just a few reminders:

Do not cut without a valid permit or you will be fined and your tree confiscated.

Only cut in the cutting area defined on the map accompanied with your permit.

If you have a permit and this is your first adventure of cutting a fine specimen of a Christmas tree:

Prepare for cold, icy weather even if it is warm when you leave your residence. Take warm clothing, cell phones, extra food, and blankets. Let someone know the cutting area you are going to.

Take your permit with you.

Take happy kids in a great mood and horses if desired. Take lots of laughter and giggles and the ability to hoist a tree even when you are laughing so hard you are crying. Laugh with each other and laugh at each other. Sing Christmas carols in the loudest voice you can and make up the words you don't know. And see if you can find a ten foot tree rounder than ours! (Be sure to video when you start to push it through the door.)

From our house to yours, may you and yours have a very Blessed and Merry Christmas. As you hang the angel on the top, (if you can reach the top), remember the blessings of Rim Country.