

The Dairy Business

By
Newton Bair

The Great Christmas Tree Hunt

Hickory Grove School was the usual one-room brick structure, situated at the cross roads of Limekiln and Spanglers Mill roads. Both roads were only

packed mud, bumpy and dusty when dry, slimy and rutted in the rain. Five or six families lived along each of these radii of a two mile circle with the schoolhouse in

the center. Our farm was exactly one mile east, on Limekiln road. Everybody walked to school, except on a few memorable occasions.

One of those never-to-be-forgotten times was just before a long ago Christmas, and this was the day the bigger boys were to find a tree for the school's Christmas program. It was imperative that I didn't miss that day, for wasn't I the one that knew where to find a suitable tree? And what better way to get excused from classes with the teacher's blessing?

Just the day before, the road to school was hopelessly blocked by drifted snow, navigable only by Pete and Henner, the farm mules which Papa grudgingly allowed me and my brother Danny to ride that day. Even the mules had to take to the fields occasionally, when the narrow road cuts got too deep with snow. Nobody minded

the trespassing for everyone did it when the occasion demanded. Sometimes the tracks remained visible in the field long after the snow was forgotten.

The teacher was Miss somebody, (all my Grammer school teachers except one was a 'Miss'), who seldom let the bigger boys out of her sight except to do or get something that she couldn't.

She boarded at the Snyder farm across the road from the schoolhouse, so bad weather did not bother her. Since the day was crisp but cloudy after the snowfall, she didn't mind giving us the afternoon off to find a tree for the Christmas program next week. It was probably a relief to have us out of sight for a while, and besides, what mischief could we get into anyway, with two feet of snow on the ground and the Holiday coming up?

The snow did slow us down considerably, so we knew we were in for a long afternoon. No use hurrying, we would time ourselves to get back just as school was dismissed.

We headed straight (so we thought) for the patch of Pines in the woods behind the old Moser farm. There should be some first rate trees up there, for that's where the delegation of older boys had gotten last year's tree.

The trouble was, with two feet of new fallen snow, many slightly

familiar landmarks were wiped out. They became less and less familiar as time passed, and finally there was nothing but black leafless trunks to be seen, and all sense of direction was obliterated.

Our feet got colder by the minute, and still no Pine trees. Nobody had a watch, but we knew it was getting late by the ominous darkness creeping over the woods. We were all a little scared, although nobody admitted it even to himself.

In desperation, someone thought of climbing a scrubby birch tree to have a better look. In a low thicket several hundred yards in the wrong direction, he spotted a grove of sorry looking cedars, bent low to the ground and hidden by snow. With no pines in sight, a cedar would have to do.

With the biggest, but not the best cedar tree we could find balanced between us, we struggled in the general direction of the schoolhouse, which seemed by this time to be miles away.

Getting heavier with every step, the tree was easier to manage by dragging instead of lifting, so that by the time we reached the schoolhouse, well after dark, the tree was flat and bald on one side.

We would be in for a lot of ridicule anyway, for the tree was a sorry specimen to begin with. It didn't matter much, for we were exhausted, discouraged, and a little bit frightened because we were all late for the evening chores.

Hickory Grove had a Christmas tree, but that was the last of the free-tree hunts ever allowed.

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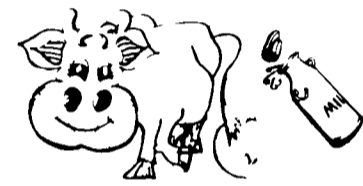


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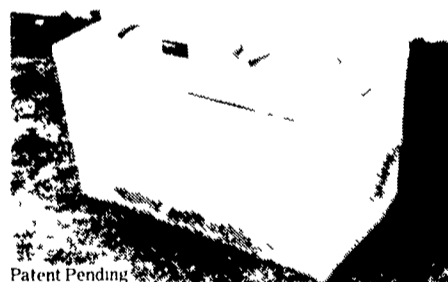
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