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From Glens Falls, A Christmas Tree and a Message of Peace

By MAURY THOMPSON

Fifty-five years ago, the nation was divided, much as it is today, when Warren County and Glens Falls, N.Y., sent the American people a Christmas tree and a message of peace.

"As everyone is aware, this has not been the best year of our lives, socially speaking," *The* (Glens Falls, N.Y.) *Post-Star* editorialized in 1969. "Elders have not understood their young. Youth have been inclined to write off the old folks as a bad job. Police forces have developed, if not an inferiority complex, a strong resentment of public attitudes shown them in some cities. ... There has seemed to be no element to unite these various community groups."

And so Warren County's leaders were delighted when a 65-foot Norway spruce growing in Crandall Park was chosen as the Nation's Christmas tree.

There were expressions of outrage, bewilderment and amusement when President Richard Nixon, at the nationally televised tree lighting ceremony, mistakenly credited the tree to Warren County, Ohio – not Warren County, New York. Local people attending the ceremony raced up to Nixon after the ceremony to correct him, but Nixon did not seem to understand.

In Glens Falls, however, there was a new spirit of unity that lasted long after Nixon's gaffe.

The Post-Star called it "a community relations miracle."

An "honor guard" of about 200 students from Adirondack Community College, now SUNY Adirondack, guarded the tree around the clock at Crandall Park for a month before it was transported to the nation's capital. They were joined by Glens Falls police officers. SUNY Adirondack's founding college

president, Dr. Charles Eisenhart, joined the students at night. He had a lot of company: More than 10,000 people passed through the park over that month, interacting with students, some joining the students around bon fires.

“Better than anything, though, has been the opportunity the tree has afforded for a sort of bull session,” *The Post-Star* editorialized. “Police, students, faculty, college officials, and adults have gradually discovered that each, in his own way is a ‘nice guy.’”

The *Glens Falls Times* said that the tree “fulfilled a vital role in Glens Falls area of bringing young people and adults together by bridging the often referred to as the ‘communication gap’ or ‘generation gap.’”

Not long before that, many of the same students who guarded the tree were looked down on as they participated in a three-mile anti-war march from the ACC campus to downtown Glens Falls. “Last month I was called a Communist and now I’m a patriot,” Charles Paul, ACC student council president, told *Glens Falls Times* columnist Don Metivier, for a column which U.S. Sen. Charles Goodell, R-N.Y., read into the Senate record.

The 1969 tree was the second of two National Christmas Trees to come from Warren County.

The honor started in 1960 when *The Warrensburg-Lake George News* initiated a campaign to persuade the federal government to select a tree from the Adirondacks for the National Christmas Tree.

The effort was successful in 1964, when the National Christmas Tree was selected from Chestertown. The Adirondack Lumberman’s Association coordinated the effort.

Douglas Luke of Glens Falls located the 72-foot, 12-ton white spruce in a woodlot off the Landon Hill Road between Chestertown and Pottersville.

Work began right after Thanksgiving to cut the tree and prepare it for its trip to Washington. It was transported on a flatbed trailer donated by Paul Hillman’s Fort Edward Express Co.

State Assemblyman Richard Bartlett, R-Glens Falls, dressed in hunter’s garb, made the last cut to fell the tree after speaking at the tree cutting ceremony.

On Dec. 18, 1964, President Lyndon B. Johnson lighted the more than 5,000 red, white and blue bulbs that decorated the tree.

A delegation of 13 boys from Boy Scout Troop 100 of Warrensburg, accompanied by Scout Master Harold Cooper, attended the tree lighting ceremony in Washington.

When the National Park Service inquired in 1969 if the region could supply a second tree of at least 65 feet tall, The Committee for the National Christmas Tree got to work, with Earl Bump, chairman of the Warren County Board of Supervisors, serving as chairman and Walter Grishkot as publicity chairman.

Grishkot is best known today as co-founder and long-time organizer of the Adirondack Balloon Festival.

The committee inspected more than 20 trees before settling on the tree in Crandall Park, which Grishkot had recommended.

The 65-foot Norway spruce was either 65, 70 or 80 years old, counting by the rings, depending on which historic news account you read.

George Calloway, a forester from Argyle, tended, watered and fertilized the tree until it was cut at 10 a.m. Nov. 22.

Miss New York Forest Queen Linda Stone assisted with cutting the tree at a ceremony which included speeches, songs and prayers.

Paul Hillman, owner of Fort Edward Express, again provided a flat-bed truck to transport the tree on its more-than-350-mile trek to Washington.

George Pierce of Fort Edward, a member of Teamsters Local 232 drove the truck.

The local committee sent along a message of peace, a giant Christmas card designed and painted by artist Forrest Jones of Pottersville.

The sign reading, "Greetings – from the mountains to the moon – Peace for all Mankind," was intended to recognize Neil Armstrong, the first astronaut to walk on the moon earlier that year.

The National Park Service would not allow the sign to be exhibited, suggesting it could be misconstrued as anti-Vietnam War sentiment.

Grishkot brought the sign back to Glens Falls and left it to The Chapman historical museum to keep for posterity.

There was a great deal of excitement leading up to the tree lighting.

About 100 proud Warren County residents attended the internationally broadcast “Pageant of Peace” tree-lighting ceremony at the White House, and thousands more watched on television at home.

Depending on which historic news account you read, the 1969 National Christmas Tree was decorated with either 6,200 red and white bulbs, or 6,500 bulbs, or 8,000.

The excitement of the Glens Falls crowd – and the nation as news reports came out – turned to astonishment when Nixon announced that the tree came from Warren County, Ohio.

Nixon repeated the gaffe, mentioning that the tree would have been a sapling when his father was a boy.

A few years later the region’s longtime congressman, a Republican, U.S. Rep. Carlton King of Saratoga Springs, would tell Edward Bartholomew, then a college-age congressional aide and later Glens Falls mayor, that he was deeply embarrassed by the President’s mistake.

“He said, I thought about correcting him, but nobody corrected Richard Nixon,” Bartholomew recalled in 2010.

Nobody, that is, except for Joan Grishkot, long-time director of Warren County Department of Public Health, the wife of Walter.

Depending which historic news account you read, Joan Grishkot either “vaulted from the vantage point she shared with her husband,” or “elbowed her way through the crowds” to set the record straight. Immediately after the ceremony she cornered Nixon Press Secretary Richard Ziegler, and then the President himself, to correct the error.

News reports, again, differ on how Nixon made the mistake.

Some suggest that Nixon was distracted by heckling from about 200 anti-war protesters just outside the ceremony area.

Others fault shoddy fact-checking by speech writers or perhaps confusion with 57 smaller evergreen trees the Ohio Power Co. had donated for the exhibit.

Regardless, Nixon’s mistake brought added publicity to Glens Falls and Warren County. At 7 the next morning, “Today Show” host Barbara Walters opened the show by saying, “We have some questions for Walter Grishkot, who was on the committee which helped find, and ship, the beautiful tree to the White House.”

Walters conducted a seven-and-a-half-minute interview with Grishkot.

As far as anyone local can remember, there never was an official apology, although Nixon did write a letter to Congressman King that the “Norway Spruce from the Adirondacks is a splendid contribution to the Pageant of Peace.”

Sources: *The Post-Star*, Nov. 28, Dec. 19, 1964; Nov. 21, Dec. 17, 1969; *The Glens Falls Times*, Nov. 19, 1969; *New York Daily News*, Oct. 8, Dec. 18, 1969; *The Washington Post*, Dec. 17, 1969; *Los Angeles Times*, Dec. 19, 1969; *The Saratogian*, Dec. 17, 1969; *The Tower*, in-house publication of the International Paper Co. Ticonderoga Mill, January 1965; “Story of the Glens Falls Tree,” published Jan. 8, 1970 by Adirondack Press; Prop sheet from Dec. 17, 1969 “Today Show”; Oral history interviews completed as research for “The Biggest Kid at the Balloon Festival: The Walter Grishkot Story,” published in 2011 by MDT Publishing.

The Bolton, N.Y., Historical Museum is celebrating the 60th anniversary of the first National Christmas Tree from Warren County.

In 1960, publisher Robert Hall initiated a campaign to persuade the federal government to select a tree from the Adirondacks for the National Christmas Tree. Hall was a persuasive power: He founded *Adirondack Life* magazine and owned several newspapers, including the *Lake George Mirror*, *Warrensburg-Lake George News*, and the *Hamilton County News*.

His efforts succeeded, and in 1964 the National Christmas Tree was selected from Chestertown. The museum, in Rogers Park in Bolton Landing, has a temporary exhibit for the holiday season chronicling the story of how the tree was selected for display at Washington, D.C.

The museum also has temporary exhibits about winter sports such as iceboating and about Christmas traditions, according to *The Lake George Mirror*.

Holiday hours at the museum are 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Dec. 21, 22, 28, 29 and Jan. 4 and 5.

<https://www.boltonhistoricalmuseum.org/>