

The January Tradition of Christmas Tree Bonfires

Imagine, if you can, a group of children, ages 8 to 13, dragging dozens of dried-out Christmas trees to a hill near their homes, and setting the trees on fire. From this bonfire, they proceed to roast hot dogs, marshmallows, warm hot chocolate, etc., and have a party, on their own, without adult supervision of any kind.

This event occurred every year in Santa Clara in January, after the Christmas trees had been taken down and thrown out. Before Christmas, these children went from house-to-house extracting a promise from the home owner that they could have their discarded tree after Christmas. When the trees were taken down these children went back for each promised tree, and took them to a “secret” place where they hoped the trees would be safe from other marauding and competing groups of these fire-crazy children.



In today’s world, (2020 plus) the thought of an activity like this would horrify any reasonable parent, but in those innocent days of the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s it was a given that there would be six or eight of these groups performing this annual ritual. But then childhood was completely different for these generations of children. From the age of about 5 or 6, children were given chores and responsibilities to complete; they were taught to work, and to complete a job well. They typically milked cows, did laundry and learned to



cook, harvested food and hay on farms, even driving tractors and trucks at young ages as they helped with the work of sustaining life. So to these generations, starting a bonfire and preparing their own food, then putting out the fire responsibly, was taken for granted, as these young people had acquired many skills and much knowledge by this young age.

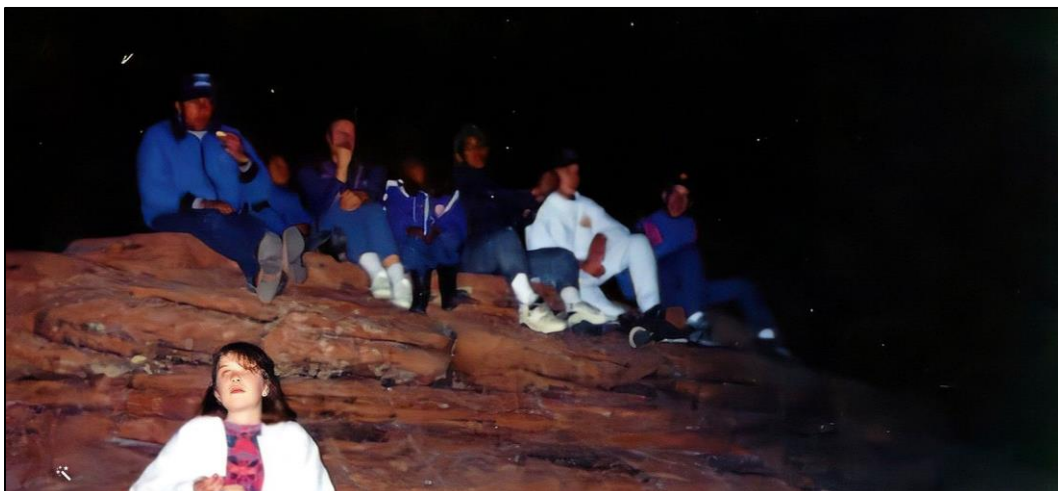
It was always a competition to see who could get the most Christmas trees to burn, and they were guarded closely in their storage places. Typically a neighborhood of kids (both boys and girls) would band together to organize these events. The day the burnings were held was not coordinated with other groups. We always held the bonfires after dark. We never realized it, but I would bet that more than a few parents were anxiously watching the fire on the hill while these bonfires parties were in progress.



One year about 30 years ago (about 1993 or 1994), siblings of the Gubler family were gathered after Christmas, reminiscing about old times. We had the wonderful idea to recreate our Christmas Tree bonfire experience so



our children could experience this tradition. We actually were able to acquire a lot of Christmas trees, and since the hills around Santa Clara are now filled with homes, we chose a place a few miles up highway 18, nestled in the huge red rocks to have our bonfire.



Our bonfire was magnificent! Anyone traveling on highway 18 could see the fire, and it wasn't long before we heard sirens, followed by the arrival of a fire truck and crew. The firemen were champions, laughed and told us to let them know in the future if we were going to set fire to the rocks. Somehow, I don't think the response would be the same today!

